

STAR
WARS

STAR WARS

SKYEWALKERS

A Clone Wars Story

Abel G. Peña



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And especially to Suzi.

This story is dedicated to the fans ... always.

STAR WARS Timeline



DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dawn of the Jedi
Volume One: Force Storm
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan
Volume Three: Force War



THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

5,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales of the Jedi
The Golden Age of the Sith
The Fall of the Sith Empire
Crosscurrent

4,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales of the Jedi
Knights of the Old Republic
The Freedon Nadd Uprising
Dark Lords of the Sith
The Sith War
Redemption

3,964 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Knights of the Old Republic
Volume One: Commencement
Volume Two: Flashpoint
Volume Three: Days of Fear, Knights of Anger
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering
Volume Five: Vector
Volume Six: Vindication
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions
Volume Eight: Destroyer
Volume Nine: Demon
War

3,956 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

The Old Republic
Revan

3,951 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

3,678 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

3,653 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic
Deceived
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

3,645 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Red Harvest
The Old Republic
Fatal Alliance
Volume Three: The Lost Suns
Annihilation

THE OLD REPUBLIC

3,638 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE OLD REPUBLIC: SHADOW OF REVAN

THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

3,630 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE ETERNAL THRONE

2,974 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Lost Tribe of the Sith
Spiral

1,032 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Knight Errant
Volume One: Aflame
Volume Two: Deluge
Volume Three: Escape

1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Bane
Path of Destruction
Jedi vs. Sith
Darth Bane
Rule of Two
Dynasty of Evil



RISE OF THE SITH 1,000-22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Darth Plagueis

53 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi - The Dark Side

44 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice
The Rising Force
The Dark Rival
The Hidden Past
The Mark of the Crown
The Defenders of the Dead
The Uncertain Path
The Captive Temple
The Day of Reckoning
The Fight for Truth
The Shattered Peace
Special Edition: Deceptions

43 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice
The Deadly Hunter
The Evil Experiment
The Dangerous Rescue

41 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice
The Ties that Bind
The Death of Hope
The Call to Vengeance
The Only Witness
The Threat Within

38 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan
The Aurorient Express
The Last Stand on Ord Mantell

33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Council - Acts of War
Maul: Lockdown

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Republic
Volume One: Prelude to Rebellion
Darth Maul

Episode I Adventures
Search for the Lost Jedi
The Bartokk Assassins
The Fury of Darth Maul
Jedi Emergency
The Ghosting Children
The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker
Capture Arawynne
Trouble on Tatooine
Rescue in the Core
Festival of Warriors
Pirates from Beyond the Sea
The Bongo Rally
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE

BOUNTY HUNTER

Jango Fett - Open Seasons

Republic

Volume Two: Outlander
Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare
Volume Four: Twilight
Infinity's End

30 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Republic

Volume Five: The Hunt for Aurra Sing
Volume Six: Darkness
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War
The Devaronian Version
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

29 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rogue Planet

28 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

Path to Truth

Jedi Quest

27 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Outbound Flight

Jedi Quest

The Way of the Apprentice
The Trail of the Jedi
The Dangerous Games

25 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

The Master of Disguise
The School of Fear
The Shadow Trap
The Moment of Truth

24 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

The Changing of the Guard
The False Peace

Starfighter: Crossbones

Republic

Volume Nine: Honor and Duty

23 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

The Final Showdown

Star Wars Adventures

Hunt the Sun Runner
The Cavern of Screaming Skulls
The Hostage Princess
Jango Fett vs. the Razor Eaters
The Shape-Shifter Strikes
The Warlords of Balmorra

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

JEDI STARFIGHTER

The Approaching Storm

Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango & Boba Fett

EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES

REPUBLIC COMMANDO

THE CLONE WARS

(VIDEO GAME)

REPUBLIC COMMANDO

THE CLONE WARS

(VIDEO GAME)

BOBA FETT

The Fight to Survive

Crossfire

Clone Wars

Volume One: The Defense of Kamino

BOBA FETT

Maze of Deception

Hunted

Clone Wars

Volume Two: Victories and Sacrifices

Republic Commando

Hard Contact

CLONE WARS:

VOLUME ONE

SkyeWalkers

Clone Wars

Volume Four: Light and Dark

The Cestus Deception

Jedi Trial

Clone Wars

Volume Three: Last Stand on Jabini
Volume Five: The Best Blades
Volume Six: On the Fields of Battle

THE CLONE WARS:

THE MOVIE

THE CLONE WARS:

SEASON ONE

The Clone Wars: Secret Missions
Breakout Squad
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates
Duel at Shattered Rock
Guardians of the Chiss Key

The Clone Wars

Volume One: Shipyards of Doom
Wild Space
No Prisoners
Volume Two: Crash Course

THE CLONE WARS:

REPUBLIC HEROES

The Clone Wars

The Colossus of Destiny
Hero of the Confederacy

Shatterpoint

Republic Commando

Triple Zero

21 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE CLONE WARS:

SEASON TWO

The Clone Wars Gambit
Stealth
Siege

The Clone Wars

The Wind Raiders of Talorann

Republic Commando

True Colors

Medstar

Battle Surgeons

Jedi Healer

THE CLONE WARS:

SEASON THREE

The Clone Wars

Deadly Hands of Shon-Ju
Strange Allies
The Starcrusher Trap

THE CLONE WARS:

SEASON FOUR

The Clone Wars

The Smuggler's Code
The Sith Hunters
Defenders of the Lost Temple

THE CLONE WARS:

SEASON FIVE

20 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

General Grievous

THE CLONE WARS:

SEASON SIX

Clone Wars

Volume Eight: The Last Siege, the Final Truth
Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

Boba Fett

A New Threat

Pursuit

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

CLONE WARS:

VOLUME TWO

Labyrinth of Evil

EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH

Republic Commando
Order 66

Republic
Volume Nine: Endgame

Kenobi

Purge

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Dark Times
Volume One: The Path to Nowhere

Darth Vader
Darth Vader & The Lost Command
Imperial Commando: 501st

Dark Times
Volume Two: Parallels
Volume Three: Vector

Coruscant Nights
Jedi Twilight

Darth Vader
Darth Vader & The Ghost Prison

Dark Times
Volume Four: Blue Harvest
Volume Five: Out of the Wilderness
Volume Six: Fire Carrier
Volume Seven: A Spark Remains

18 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader
Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin

Last of the Jedi
The Desperate Mission
Dark Warning
Underworld
Death on Naboo
A Tangled Web
Return of the Dark Side
Secret Weapon
Against the Empire
Master of Deception
Reckoning

Coruscant Nights
Streets of Shadow
Patterns of Force
The Last Jedi

17 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader
Darth Vader & Cry of Shadows

15 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

DROIDS

10 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Marvel)
The Han Solo Trilogy
The Paradise Snare

5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Dark Horse)
Volume One: The Kalarba Adventures
Volume Two: Rebellion
Volume Three: Season of Revolt
Jabba the Hutt
The Gaar Suppoon Hit
The Hunger of Princess Nampi
The Dynasty Trap
Betrayal
The Han Solo Trilogy
The Hutt Gambit

4 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures
Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu

3 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures
Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon
Boba Fett
Enemy of the Empire
The Lando Calrissian Adventures
Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka

THE FORCE UNLEASHED

Death Star

Agent of the Empire
Volume One: Iron Eclipse

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Agent of the Empire
Volume Two: Hard Targets
The Han Solo Trilogy
Rebel Dawn

The Han Solo Adventures
Han Solo At Star's End
Han Solo's Revenge
Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

Adventures in Hyperspace
Fire Ring Race
Shinbone Showdown

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YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE FORCE UNLEASHED II

Star Wars Adventures
Han Solo & The Hollow Moon of Khorya

Dark Forces
Soldier for the Empire

Empire
Volume One: Betrayal

Death Troopers
Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika

Empire
Volume Two: Darklighter

EMPIRE AT WAR

X-WING

Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead

LETHAL ALLIANCE

DARK FORCES

Shadow Games

The Assassination of Darth Vader



THE REBELLION

0-4 YEARS AFTER

STAR WARS: A New Hope

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**EPISODE IV:
A NEW HOPE**

**BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE
SQUADRON**

REBEL ASSAULT

**ROGUE SQUADRON II:
ROGUE LEADER**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

Empire
Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:
REBEL STRIKE**

Star Wars Missions
Assault on Yavin 4
Escape from Thyferra
Attack on Delrakkin
Destroy the Liquidator

Scoundrels

Pizzazz
The Keeper's World
The Kingdom of Ice

Star Wars Missions
Darth Vader's Return
Rogue Squadron to the Rescue
Bounty on Bonodan
Total Destruction

Rebel Force
 Target
 Hostage
 Renegade
 Firefight
 Trapped

Allegiance

Rebel Force
 Uprising

Empire
 Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

Classic Star Wars
 Volume One: Doomworld
 Volume Two: Dark Encounters

Science Adventures
 Emergency in Escape Pod Four
 Journey Across Planet X

Star Wars Missions
 Revolt of the Battle Droids
 Showdown in Mos Eisley
 Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids
 The Vactooine Disaster

Star Wars
 Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin
 Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan
 Volume Three: Rebel Girl
 Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

ROGUE SQUADRON

Galaxy of Fear
 Eaten Alive
 City of the Dead
 Planet Plague

Empire
 Volume Four: The Heart of the Rebellion
 Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries

River of Chaos

Boba Fett
 Man with a Mission

Galaxy of Fear
 Ghost of the Jedi
 Army of Terror

Empire
 Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers
 Volume Seven: The Wrong Side of the War

Galaxy of Fear
 The Brain Spiders
 The Swarm

Choices of One

Rebellion
 Volume One: My Brother, My Enemy
 Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit
 Volume Three: Small Victories
 Volume Four: Vector

Boba Fett
 Overkill

Galaxy of Fear
 Spore
 The Doomsday Ship
 Clones

Star Wars Adventures
 Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Galaxy of Fear
 The Hunger

THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Star Wars Missions
 The Hunt for Han Solo
 The Search for Grubba the Hutt
 Ithorian Invasion
 Togorian Trap

Empire and Rebellion
 Honor Among Thieves

Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine

Star Wars Missions
 Prisoner of the Nikto Pirates
 The Monster of Dweem
 Voyage to the Underworld
 Imperial Jailbreak

2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: GALAXIES

TIE FIGHTER

Splinter of the Mind's Eye
 Star Wars Adventures
 Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom
 Boba Fett and the Ship of Fear

Epic Collection
 The Newspaper Strips Volume One
 The Newspaper Strips Volume Two

Empire and Rebellion
 Razor's Edge

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rebel Heist

EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

X-WING ASSAULT

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

Star Wars Adventures
 Luke Skywalker & the Treasure of the Dragonsnakes
 The Will of Darth Vader

Classic Star Wars
 Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil
 Volume Three: Screams of the Void

X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER

EWOKS SEASON ONE

EWOKS SEASON TWO

EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE

EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR

Classic Star Wars
 Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages
 Battle of the Bounty Hunters

Classic Star Wars
 Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE



THE NEW REPUBLIC 4-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from Jabba's Palace

EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI

Mara Jade: By the Emperor's Hand

The Bounty Hunter Wars
 The Mandalorian Armor
 Slave Ship
 Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

Classic Star Wars
 Volume Six: Wookiee World
 Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

X-Wing: Rogue Squadron
 Volume One: The Rebel Opposition
 Volume Two: The Phantom Affair
 Volume Three: Battleground: Tatooine
 Volume Four: The Warrior Princess
 Volume Five: Requiem for a Rogue
 Volume Six: In the Empire's Service
 Volume Seven: Blood and Honor
 Volume Eight: Masquerade
 Volume Nine: Mandatory Retirement

Jedi Prince
The Glove of Darth Vader
The Lost City of the Jedi
Zorba the Hutt's Revenge
Mission from Mount Yoda
Queen of the Empire
Prophets of the Dark Side

5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from the New Republic
Boba Fett
Twin Engines of Destruction
Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor
The Heart of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

Dark Forces
Rebel Agent
Jedi Knight

6 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing
Rogue Squadron

7 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing
Wedge's Gamble
The Kryptos Trap
The Bacta War
Wraith Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

8 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Courtship of Princess Leia
Tatooine Ghost

9 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Thrawn Trilogy
Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command
X-Wing
Isard's Revenge

10 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

JEDI KNIGHT: MYSTERIES OF THE SITH

Dark Empire Trilogy
Dark Empire
Dark Empire II

Boba Fett
Bounty on Bar-Kooda
When the Fat Lady Swings
Murder Most Foul

11 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Empire Trilogy
Empire's End
Boba Fett
Agent of Doom
Crimson Empire
Crimson Empire
The Bounty Hunters: Kenix Kil
Crimson Empire
Council of Blood

Jedi Academy
Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force
I, Jedi

12 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Children of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST

Darksaber

13 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing
Starfighters of Adumar
Planet of Twilight

Jedi Academy
Leviathan
Crimson Empire
Empire Lost

14 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Crystal Star

JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY

16 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Black Fleet Crisis
Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Nest

17 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The New Rebellion

18 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Corellian Trilogy
Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

19 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Hand of Thrawn
Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future
Union
Scourge

22 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Junior Jedi Knights
The Golden Globe
Lyric's World
Promises
Anakin's Quest
Vader's Fortress
Kenobi's Blade
Survivor's Quest

23 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Young Jedi Knights
Heirs of the Force
Shadow Academy
The Lost Ones
Lightsabers
Darkest Knight
Jedi Under Siege
Shards of Alderaan

24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Young Jedi Knights
Diversity Alliance
Delusions of Grandeur
Jedi Bounty
The Emperor's Plague
Return to Ord Mantell
Trouble on Cloud City
Crisis on Crystal Reef



**NEW JEDI ORDER
25-36 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Vector Prime
Invasion
Volume One: Refugees
Volume Two: Rescues
Volume Three: Revelations
New Jedi Order
Dark Tide: Onslaught
Dark Tide: Ruin
Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial
Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse
Chewbacca

26 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Balance Point
Edge of Victory: Conquest
Edge of Victory: Rebirth

27 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines: Rebel Stand
Traitor

28 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Destiny's Way
Force Heretic: Remnant
Force Heretic: Refugee
Force Heretic: Reunion
The Final Prophecy

29 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Joiner King

36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury

41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Revelation
Invincible
Crosscurrent
Riptide

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Millennium Falcon
Fate of the Jedi
Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash

44 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse
X-Wing
Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Crucible

137 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
Volume One: Broken
Volume Two: Shards
Volume Three: Claws of the Dragon
Volume Four: Alliance
Volume Five: The Hidden Temple
Volume Six: Legacy
Volume Seven: Storms
Volume Eight: Tatooine
Volume Nine: Monster
Volume Ten: Extremes

138 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
War

Legacy II
Volume One: Prisoner of the Floating World
Volume Two: Outcasts of the Broken Ring

139 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy II
Volume Three: Wanted: Ania Solo
Volume Four: Empire of One

The events in this story occur between the films
Attack of the Clones and The Clone Wars.

PRELUDIUM

As acrid smoke fills her lungs, the fatally crippled Republic Captain Brisha Shard accepts that there is no saving her ship. With her next tortured breath, she accepts that there is no saving her life. She licks her lips—sieving iron from blood. And as her bronzium eyes hopscotch over the maimed bodies strewn about her burning bridge, every one of them sharing that dusky, synonymous face ... she laments her perfect lack of remorse.

Clones, she thinks. Why can't I give a damn?

Captain Shard *knows* why. Each dead clone isn't one of her Deltron children. Alarik. Bellen. Viqi. If not for these

meat-droids, her son and daughters would be the ones drafted to die in this war.

For a heartbeat, the gold-skinned officer breathes easier.

Shard's "mercy mission" to deliver food and aid to plague-stricken Marat V has apparently failed. Her ship has fallen victim to an orbital ambush, transforming the *Golandras* from a medical frigate into a dying star.

Cloaked mines, she surmises. *I should've expected it.*

Captain Shard *should've* expected it. But even as shame consumes her mind like brainworm rot, the woman steels herself. She can still save the mission.

At the cost of her own hide, the *Golandras* has punched a path through the invisible minefield ... and her precious cargo is loaded.

Explosions stitch the potholed ship, racing toward the bridge, as Shard slithers her useless torso over roasted clone trooper carcasses to her command chair and slaps the control console—shooting off two escape pods loaded with those perishable goods *most* desperately needed by the planet's inhabitants below.

Captain Shard wants to smile.

That, however, is a privilege reserved for the living: woman, child, and clone alike.

Compromising, she bleeds instead.

And as the last explosion engulfs the bridge, ripping apart the composite technicalities that constitute a captain of the Republic ... Brisha Shard takes her leave.

I
BLOOD BROTHERS

Chapter One

Master and commanders, The craven terrorist Zeta Magnus, alias “Saturna the Garu,” “K’am’ir Zaarin,” and “Eon Null,” has enslaved the S’kytri of Marat V and proclaimed himself their ruler. SBI believes this tyrannical genetics master to be not only Count Dooku’s akk dog responsible for the recent stone mite outbreaks, but the homicidal maniac behind the carbonite metastasis crypts of Anaxes and the Katana fleet’s descent into wholesale insanity.

Chancellor Palpatine demands this coward’s apprehension, unharmed, to stand trial—denying Dooku any propaganda fodder. But be—[garbled]—his affectation for the wardrobe of Onderon’s bygone royal Magi Sentinels, I strongly believe Magnus may be one of the

architects of the Arkanian Revolution. Specifically, the prime clone of those murdering fiends, the Accelerated Transgenic Heuristic Abhorers.

Captain Shard of the MedStar frigate Golandras and an elite unit fresh from Kamino will rendezvous with you at the Marat system's edge—[garbled]—a “mercy mission.” You should, therefore, land without impediment.

One final warning. I witnessed, firsthand, the Abhorers horrifically unprejudiced appetites digest

even “indestructible” diamond alloys to chyme—to say nothing of plain human flesh.

Scrutinize the attached datafiles ... mercilessly.

May the Force—[garbled]

—Mace Windu of the Jedi High Council
pre-mission holotransmission, corrupted
datafiles not attached

Chapter Two

As the *Golandras* went nova in Marat V's local space, her escape pods raked fire across the sky like twin shooting stars.

Chunks of twisted, superheated metal flew from the smoldering vessels as they rocketed planetward for a fatally ballistic kiss. The capsules slammed side by side into the base of a mountain, belching forth a cataract of boulders, fossilized alien remains and dust. And almost as quickly, the avalanche precipitated by the impact moved to bury this fresh and unsightly geological scar.

Impossibly, the smoking oval pods appeared intact, if severely mangled, in their enormous crater. But it went

without saying: their life-saving, “perishable” contents *assuredly* victims of compressive liquefaction.

Then, three shafts of brilliant light—blue and green and blue—stabbed from the wrecks like the inquisitive tongues of hatching Gallian cobras. Yet,

the speed and precision with which these deadly instruments carved a window from each durasteel shell proclaimed a trio of far more dangerous creatures.

In a flicker, the spears of light disappeared, leaving only the outlines of two geometric figures: circle, square. The improvised doors and obstructing rubble were then blasted outward by some unseen cause, pearlescent crash foam slobbering out in their wake.

“*Blast!*” a bearded figure said, slamming his fist on the outside of his pod. “This is why I *hate* flying!”

“You’re starting to sound like Threepio, Master,” said a younger man, emerging from his own lifepod module slathered in foam. “Are you alright?”

“*Fine*, Anakin—better than Shard and her crew.” General Kenobi squinted skyward at the expanding remains of the MedStar frigate, still splintering into fiery pieces in atmospheric entry.

Anakin slapped synthetic residue from his robes as his master ran calming hands front to back over his head—wringing out his helmet-like coif. The Padawan pretended not to notice as Kenobi jumped to the ground, slipping slightly on the spume-glazed rocks.

“It could’ve been worse....” The third, broad-shouldered Jedi gripped Anakin’s proffered hand and hauled himself out of his capsule. Then, almost

immediately, he doubled-over and emptied his stomach onto the planet.

“Commander Vantor?” Kenobi inquired.

“I told Hal not to have that bantha breakfast biscuit,” Anakin said.

“Frizz off, Ani,” Halagad Vantor responded half-heartedly. “A little space sickness. I’m just ... wizard, General.”

“I gathered,” Kenobi muttered. “But I don’t see how things could be much worse.”

“At least we’re not disintegrated,” Anakin suggested.

Kenobi grunted. “That’s *one* way to look at it.”

“I feel pretty kriffing *Class-D*’ed myself,” Halagad said between huffs and spits of dross.

Class-D disintegration ... otherwise known as *transcendental* annihilation. The invention of “absolute” disruptor technology, by the mysterious fatalists of Plootark IX, introduced a form of pure death so unique in heinousness the alien science had been outlawed the galaxy-over. Believed to target midi-chlorians, matter thus atomically eradicated was said to disappear even from detection in the Force—the ultimate affront to life.

“Language, Commander,” General Kenobi said.

“Our Tarks made it, Master,” Anakin confirmed. “How about yours?”

“With that heavy Katarn armor of theirs, it’s a wonder the mountain isn’t the one counting its blessings.”

Halagad watched as, dripping crash foam, four massive robotesque things, two to a lifepod, emerged from the wrecked conveyances. The glowing sun glared off of their tank-like, silver body armor and the blue T-visors of their helmets. Armed with grenades, garrotes, gauntlet vibroblades, flamethrowers, and their trademark oversized DC-17m

interchangeable blaster rifles, they more resembled the newest, deadliest model of assassin droid than men.

Clone commandos. RC-1570, RC-1571, RC-1572, RC-1573—Nilo, Xoni, Quo, and Kupe.

The Grand Army of the Republic's bombastic answer to covert operations.

"Captain Nilo," Kenobi said. "What's your men's condition?"

"Optimal, sir," returned the unit leader, his modestly flared, black shoulder pauldron the sole distinction between himself and the other commandos.

The general himself had recently taken to wearing armor, claiming to do so in order to generate greater rapport with the soldiers of the GAR. But Halagad suspected his master derived more than a modest thrill suiting up as the Jedi Knights had in olden wars with the Order of the Terrible Glare and Brotherhood of Darkness. While General Kenobi had donned full clone combat gear in earlier battles, the Jedi general now wore a more

functional version, consisting of a chestplate over his tunic and arm and leg guards.

But Halagad had favored Kenobi's initial example. The burly Padawan learner wore a traditional Jedi tunic and cloak over the pristine clone trooper armor that covered him neck to toe. In addition, a golden medallion hung from a thin chain around his neck, clunking not-so-quietly on his plastoid chestplate with every step.

In fact, of the seven-man team, only *one* wasn't wearing any armor.

Unless you're counting his ego.

"Tark Squad!" Anakin said, hands clasped behind his back.

The commandos snapped to attention. “Commander, sir!”

“Establish a perimeter and enable short-range communication!”

Without the faintest hesitation, the clones obeyed.

“*Remember* Anakin,” Kenobi admonished. “Despite appearances, they’re *not* droids.”

It was a predictable reprimand from the general. But Halagad detected Kenobi’s distress over the obliterated medical frigate bleeding through.

“If you say so, Master,” Anakin said. “But I thought these Kamino units were supposed to take all orders without question?”

“That doesn’t mean they can’t learn to *resent* you.”

“These clones in particular,” Halagad observed, “seem a lot more ... humorless.”

“They’re commandos,” Anakin explained. “Different breed than regular troopers.”

“I got that from ‘em before abandoning ship,” Halagad said. “*That* and that their names are Thyrsian for ‘Zero,’ ‘One,’ ‘Two,’ and ‘Three.’”

Anakin snorted. “Let me guess. ‘Tark’ means ‘Four?’”

General Kenobi’s grave mood seemed to give at last as his lip pulled into a quarter-smile.

“The Kaminoans *did* say they considered a Thyrsus Sun Guard as prime donor for the GAR,” he said. “Tark Squad must be Thyrsian trained: Jango’s genes, just not his manners.”

The general would know. He had the fortune of tussling with the Grand Army’s Mandalorian prime donor. All clone troopers were grown from the bounty hunter Jango Fett’s

genetic template, though these new commandos underwent unique training from various specially recruited mercenaries.

“In any case,” Anakin insisted, “*these* clones seem obedient.”

“Yes,” Kenobi said. “Unlike some Padawans.”

Halagad and Anakin both watched as the Jedi general inhaled a deep breath of the planet’s fresh oxygen-rich mountain air, let out a self-satisfied sigh, and made for one of the escape pods.

The Padawans turned to one another.

“He was talking about you,” they said.

Chapter Three

“See, Hal...” Anakin said. “That’s why I vow never to *have* a Padawan.”

“Couldn’t stand someone as bad as you, I suppose.”

“I know my limits.”

“I was talking about mine.” Hands on his hips, Halagad made a slow three-sixty survey of the endless landscape, whistling softly. “Legions of Xendor.... So this is Marat Five.”

“Hopefully Master Windu got that much right.”

Anakin took in the colossal mountains against the backdrop of a honeyed firmament, armoring the planet and staggering under their own gravities.

“These formations are absolutely incredible,” Halagad said. “We had the Triplehorn mountains bordering the Aldera Royal Palace. But nothing like this.”

“I know what you mean. Reminds me of podracing over Ben’s Mesa back home.” A twinkle coalesced in Anakin’s eye. “I bet they could make a wizard racing track through here.”

“*Very unlikely!*” Obi-Wan interjected from his escape pod. “*Given podracing remains very illegal!*”

“So does enslaving planets, Master!”

“Too bad that’s almost *all* we know about this place,” Halagad said.

The Padawans watched their master return with something in hand.

“Here,” Obi-Wan said. “I managed to scavenge these from the pods.” He handed them each a pair of power cells. “And we have our mandate, Commander Ventor. *That* should be enough.”

“Zeta Magnus,” Halagad hissed. “He’s out there ... somewhere in these mountains.”

Anakin patted the lightsaber at his waist with golden, prosthetic fingers. “Not for long.”

“*Alive*, Anakin,” his master reminded him.

“How *is* that lightsaber working for you, Ani?” Halagad asked.

Anakin unclipped the Jedi weapon from his belt and fired it up. A vivid green blade flashed into existence.

“This thing?” he said, giving the thrumming laser sword a thoughtful once-over. “Reminds me of my first lightsaber.”

“Qui-Gon Jinn’s,” Obi-Wan said.

Halagad beamed.

“Exactly,” Anakin said. “...Only not nearly as good. I admit, I like the black finish, and I’ll have to keep in mind

this one-piece emitter shroud and magnetic stabilizing ring. But, can you believe this lightsaber didn't even come with a blade-length adjuster? I guess that's okay if you don't wind up, say, running for your life from fanatical followers of the Church of the First Frequency...."

Halagad cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Whatever nerfherder crafted this thing barely had a clue," Anakin concluded, giving his wrist a thrumming twirl before deactivating the weapon. "But now that I've made some special modifications, it's at least ... acceptable."

"Well, Rimmer, I know just what you mean," Halagad said, unhooking the lightsaber at his own hip and spitting out a vibrant blue beam. "I mean, I like the flashback water-seal, but you know the laserbrain that built *this* one used a faulty energy gate in the crystal energy chamber?"

"What?!"

"I know, I couldn't believe it either. It's like he had two left tentacles. I had to replace the energy modulation circuits and recalibrate the focusing crystal *three* times just to get it working right."

"It's a new lightsaber," Anakin grumbled.

"I guess that's what happens when someone builds one of these in just two days."

"Just *one* day," Anakin corrected.

"My point exactly."

"Let me see that...."

"Well, it's fixed *now*," Halagad said, pulling the lightsaber out of Anakin's reach.

Anakin and Halagad had recently partaken in an ancient ritual known as the Concordance of Fealty. It was a sacred bond in which two Jedi took a vow of reciprocal learning and traded lightsabers as a symbol of their mutual trust and

commitment. The ceremony was only infrequently practiced and almost exclusively by Jedi Masters—the general consensus concerning two apprentices taking the pledge being that of the blind leading the blind.

Yet, Anakin and Halagad, both joining the Jedi Order at relatively advanced ages, were far from traditional Padawans. They had met in the tangled aftermath of the Outbound Flight project: an extragalactic expedition which had gone terribly wrong. The Galactic Senate had put the bullheaded Jedi Knight Everen Ettene and her Padawan Halagad in charge of an aggressive investigation, including into Anakin and Obi-Wan's involvement in the affair.

An unlikely kinship had unfurled in the years since that unfriendly introduction, and with Obi-Wan's grudging consent, the Concordance allowed the Padawans to circumvent the Jedi Order's long-standing protocol of one master to one apprentice. For Anakin, taking the oath had made perfect sense. After Virgillia 7, Halagad needed a master and, after Geonosis, Anakin needed—*someone*.

Someone to tell about his mother.

About Padmé.

"Sirs," Captain Nilo reported from the crater's edge above, "life-forms approaching from the northeast."

"I don't sense anything," Halagad said.

"No response to our identification request."

"Stand down, Captain. That's our contact," Obi-Wan said. He turned to Halagad. "Sensitivity isn't your strong suit, Commander."

"That hurts, General."

"Try edifying two Padawans sometime."

With the Marat V datafiles corrupted, Anakin had no idea what to expect for a welcoming party. But as the clone

commandos lined up along the crater edge behind the Jedi, he made out six humanoids flying toward them on giant membranous wings. The flyers came in two distinct shades. The three smaller beings, with a soft aquamarine tint to their flesh, appeared female, while the three larger ones, with cerulean skin not dissimilar to Bantha milk, male. Wavy hair tufts of varying silver, orange, and yellow shades crowned their otherwise bald heads. The men and two of the women carried spear-like weapons, and all of them wore little in the way of clothing, scarcely accounting for modesty.

“Wind drag,” Halagad whispered.

Though sharing a passing likeness to a Toydarian’s tiny wings, the S’kytris’ majestic alae were nothing like the hyperkinetic flapping of Anakin’s old slavemaster. Whether just nerves or the vestiges of some primeval instinct, Anakin couldn’t help a sense of deep unease as the gargoylelike silhouettes neared like hunting sand bats, their wings beating unsettlingly out of sync. As a boy, he had heard star-hoppers tell tale of

angels in deep space. But he remembered now that demons, too, were a part of the legend.

Wings stuttered as the S’kytri party alit at the crater edge opposite the rifle-cradling clones. They were a handsome, near-human species, the irises of their eyes matching the respective tints of their bodies. Nearly two meters tall, the muscularly built women and men matched Anakin and Halagad in height, though their arched wings rose nearly another half meter above that. Oddly, though the men’s ears appeared analogous to human, the tops of the females’ ears tapered dynamically to points, golden earrings garnishing lobes and vertices alike. Their strapping leader bore a staff

with a silver hook, while his honor guard wielded aurodium-tipped ceremonial spears and unreadable faces.

One member of their entourage, however, easily stood out. Coming up to the leader's shoulder was a young girl not older than thirteen standard years, carrying only a satchel.

"Outworlders!" The amber-haired leader boomed. "I am Klarymére, Lord of the Highland Clans and Patriarch of *S'kye*—what your Republic calls Marat Five. I thank you for heeding my call for help."

From below, Obi-Wan inclined slightly, with Anakin and Halagad following suit. "I am Obi-Wan Kenobi, Republic General and Jedi Knight. These are Jedi Commanders Halagad Vantor and Anakin

Skywalker and the clone commandos of Tark Squad."

Almost as one, all of those blue and green S'kytri eyes locked solely on Anakin, studying the Padawan like fresh prey.

"I..." Anakin swallowed. "We, uh ... did not anticipate so esteemed a herald, my lord."

The patriarch's cunning eyes lingered on him a moment or two longer ... then, almost casually, shifted to Obi-Wan. "Esteem is unwarranted, Jedi. Your sacrifices are courtesy enough. We witnessed the destruction of your Republic frigate."

"Yes..." Obi-Wan said. "Along with the crew's lives, I'm afraid the provisions intended for your people were destroyed."

The patriarch's deep voice pitched perceptibly. "The antidote?"

"A reprieve while Dr. Boll and the Ministry of Science finalize the actual cure," the general explained. "But lost all the same."

Disciplined as the sentinels were, the wings of several seemed to sag subtly at the unwelcome news. But not their ruler.

"I feared as much," Klarymére admitted. "But that is why I have personally come. My people are a proud and skeptical race, General Kenobi. It required considerable coaxing to persuade them of Republic aid. Without your promised victuals and medicines, convincing them to accept help from walkers will be more difficult still."

"Walkers?" Anakin echoed.

"*Walkers*," Klarymére repeated. In the blink of an eye, the alien patriarch snapped his enormous wings into full span. "Can you fly, boy?"

Anakin allowed himself a smile. "They say I'm the best star pilot in the galaxy. My lord."

"Yes," Klarymére said, enfolding his wings and peering past the young Jedi at the two wrecked and butchered escape pods behind him. "I'm sure."

The small S'kytri female stifled a laugh. Anakin reddened.

"Nice one, Ani."

"Shut up, Hal."

"My people are also wary of your clones, given the Great Tyrant Zeta Magnus' devotion to that experimental discipline." Klarymére spared the troopers a glance. "Only together may we satisfy them your coming is fortuitous."

"Our mandate gives you our complete cooperation," Obi-Wan said. "The Republic wishes to neutralize Magnus as much as you do."

"That is unlikely. Unless you've paid witness to droves of your own people dying of starvation and transfigured into abominations of nature."

"Your point is taken, Patriarch."

“There is one more thing.” All eyes turned to the young girl at Klarymére’s side as she now spoke for the first time. She removed her satchel, opening it expectantly. “You will have to surrender your weapons.”

Anakin exchanged looks with Halagad, their hands going instinctively to their lightsabers. The clone commandos stood stoic.

“Heed my daughter Kharys’ words. It is our law,” the patriarch said. “Our people take a dim view of warfare, allowing weapons only under the most restricted circumstances.”

As if on cue, the sentries at either side of father and daughter leveled their pikes at the Jedi.

Obi-Wan had yet to move ... and probably even blink. But casting a look over his shoulder at the Padawans then back at Klarymére, the Jedi general at last moved his hand toward his own weapon.

“Of course,” he said.

Unclipping his lightsaber, he tossed it up. The S’kytri guards tensed. But Klarymére stayed them with a hiss, catching the cylinder with his free hand. He dropped it unceremoniously into Kharys’ satchel.

The barrel-chested sentry beside Klarymére purred something, and the patriarch replied placating in his native tongue.

Now it was Anakin and Halagad’s turns. Mindful of the stir Obi-Wan had caused, they simply raised their blade hilts above their heads.

Klarymére nodded to the guard with whom he’d been speaking. “Aragh.”

Guardsmen Aragh flipped his spear and spiked it in the ground before swooping into the crater. He plucked the

sabers artfully from the Padawans' outstretched hands and arced toward the sky. The azure-skinned man hung a few seconds, inspecting the exotic arms, before gliding back down.

Frowning in near disgust, Aragh handed the Jedi weapons to Kharys. Then he aimed that same hard stare at the armed clones, singing something harsh.

Anakin didn't speak S'kytric, but took his meaning. "Men, empty your Deeces."

In a fluid motion, Nilo and his squad removed their rifle magazines and tossed them into the waiting hands of the Padawans below. An orange-haired female sentry—Herana, if Anakin parsed the aliens' speech right—snatched up the ammunition in turn.

Aragh continued eyeing the commandos cautiously. "Your soldiers are as living weapons," he said. "They will have to remove their armor or submit themselves to our dungeons."

Anakin wondered if a near-naked species gave even a second thought to requesting soldiers strip down to their standard issue synth-briefs. He also thought it ironic the commandos were the ones considered the living weapons.

He turned up toward the clones. "Captain?"

"We'll keep the armor, Commander," Nilo said.

Anakin looked to his master for confirmation as Obi-Wan nodded.

"So would I," Anakin said. "Tarks, give us a hand." The commandos helped him and Halagad climb out of the cavity. "Now, give me your binders."

Nilo, Xoni, Quo and Kupe carried out his command practically simultaneously. He was beginning to *really* like these commando units. Anakin handed a pair of binders to

Halagad, and the clones patiently waited while the Jedi learners cuffed them.

“My lord,” Anakin said. “As a token of our good will, we submit Tark Squad into your care.”

Klarymère was apparently satisfied. “Very well. Follow me.”

Once Anakin and Halagad assisted Obi-Wan out from the pit, the quartet of S’kytri sentries surrounded the Jedi and clones. Halagad candidly sized up the nearest one, the flame-haired female. She didn’t flinch.

“Well,” Anakin said to him as they marched. “We already lost each other’s lightsabers. Does this mean we’re not friends anymore?”

“Depends on whether we get them back.”

“I’ll try not to let your lack of faith disturb me.”

“Only thing disturbing here is how big your head’s gotten since I met you.”

“At least *this* head isn’t losing its hair, old man.”

Halagad ran a hand through his short, tar-black crine down to his Padawan braid. “Sure ... your hair isn’t receding, Rimmer. Just your arm.” He pointed at Anakin’s prosthetic limb. “I hear that gets worse with age, you know.”

“In that case, I’ll have to melt down your medallion for spare parts.”

“Envious, Ani?” Halagad gave the medal hanging at his chest a quick buff. “You know, the *Supreme Chancellor* gave this to me. Didn’t you get one? Right, right—Palpatine’s only given one to *me* and Master C’baoth.”

“I thought you don’t like politicians, Nerfherder.”

“Politicians, no. Shiny medals, yes.”

“And Senator Organa?”

“Prestor doesn’t count.”

Anakin shook his head. "Hypocrisy suits you, you know that?"

Halagad nodded sagely. "We medalists like to think so."

Chapter Four

Natural, pyramidal skyscrapers, kilometers high, dwarfed them as they trekked through the narrow mountain defile beneath Skye's baking sun. Overhead, a pastel-skinned S'kytri guardsman kept vigil, while the rest strode grim, with clawed feet scratching at the ground, on either side of a column comprised of Anakin, Halagad, and the Tarks. Leading the pack, Lord Klarymére and his adolescent daughter walked beside Obi-Wan. The girl's periodic looks back, exaggerated by having to peer round her own wing, suggested worry they were being followed.

And littering the trail, like hundreds of unhelpful landmarks, were the bodies.

At first, there was only one or two: a gaunt, blue or green corpse, here and there, showing up unexpectedly along the corridor, mouth drawn horribly agape, as if still anticipating the sustenance never to come. Ignored by Klarymére, Obi-Wan, too, initially passed these in silence.

But then, like the road to Stalbringion damnation, droves of emaciated S'kytri began paving the path before them. Lifeless husks piled one atop the other, skin stretched tight across ribs, wings shriveled like dead leaves, muscle catabolized by starvation. The men and women rotted under the blistering rays of Marat Prime as a black rash on their flesh seemed to devour them piece by piece. The stench was all but intolerable.

"By the Eternal..." Obi-Wan exclaimed. "What happened to these pathetic life-forms?"

"Do not touch them," Klarymére cautioned. "Though they succumbed to hunger to escape it, the Great Tyrant's mutagen now consumes them in death."

"If you don't mind my saying, Lord Klarymére," Obi-Wan observed, "you and *your* retinue appear strikingly hale."

"Of course. It is the patriarch's burden to be the symbol of Skye, General. So long as I and mine are strong, hope galvanizes our people to thwart Zeta Magnus and his diseased Outland Clanners."

"Of course." Obi-Wan changed tactics. "Skye's Outland Clan is in rebellion, then?"

"Yes and no," the patriarch said. "The Outland Clan makes up a third of our number, consisting of those S'kytri who embrace life as walkers and reject the creed of the Windborn. As well as those reverse-pigmented aberrants gone undestroyed upon hatching."

"I'm sorry?"

“*Mutants*, Master Jedi,” his daughter Kharys offered. “Maroon and orange-fleshers.”

“And this is grounds for a newborn’s death sentence?”

“In the past, it was law,” Klarymère explained. “Now, it is a choice S’kytri mates make. Parents generally offer a disfigured newborn in sacrifice to the Great Wind at Mount Krisklar rather than afflict it with existence. Condescension for the Outlander misfits among Highland and especially Lowlanders runs old and deep.”

Obi-Wan did his best not to look flustered. “A mutual resentment would seem natural.”

“Very natural. Employed, long ago, as the Lowlanders’ indentured servants, the Outland Clan etched a niche farming the arable land among Skye’s eminent peaks. We now barter for and depend upon their comestibles and allow them to live in defiance of our sacred laws. The system is imperfect, but despite a few isolated incidents, we have lived in relative peace.”

“However, since Magnus arrived,” his daughter added, “he’s turned the Outland Clan against us.”

“Cutting off your food supply,” Obi-Wan said.

“*Our* food supply. The Magister himself is said to dine on the flesh of the Outla—”

“The prattle of fledglings,” Klarymère cut her off, extending his tongue and clamping his teeth in quick succession—a gesture Obi-Wan took as derisive.

“Force willing,” he said. “How did Magnus come here?”

“How else? He was invited,” the patriarch said. “Arriving in his bizarre starship, he promised the Outlanders he could increase their farming production with advanced scientific techniques. He even promised a cure for their stigmatizing pigmentations. Their eyes were as seeled. As their reward,

Magnus unleashed his virus upon them, changing them into his malformed and hulking vassals. The same fate he has promised us all since proclaiming himself Magister of Skye and strangling communications to the outside worlds.”

“Yes, but *why*?” Obi-Wan found himself blurting. “There is no logic to Magnus’ action here. Skye is an island on the very fringe of the Outer Rim Territories.”

“Our planet may not share the coveted significance Hutt Space has for the Confederacy and Republic, General, but we deem it invaluable, all the same.”

“I intended no offense, Patriarch.” Access to the Hutts’ Outer Rim-bound hyperlanes was indeed becoming a vital war imperative. Obi-Wan chose his next words carefully. “Skye’s strategic benefit for the Separatists is merely ... unobvious.”

“Likewise, I mean only to *evince* the obvious. Zeta Magnus may not *be* in league with the Separatists. And as arbitrarily as we S’kytri bestow a priceless value on our world, so too may an Entyrmion-spawned, genocidal madman.”

Obi-Wan considered as Klarymére fell silent. The patriarch’s pragmatic deference to a reality ruled by the random was an argument as old as time. But the Jedi general also knew that it was a deference primarily rooted in despair. Hope—or lack of it—Obi-Wan knew, exerted a manifest influence on the energy field surrounding all living things.

Still, Magnus’ eccentric actions—enslaving a third of a planetary population and setting himself up as its inscrutable king—just didn’t add up.

Obi-Wan, like every Jedi, knew the path to the dark side. Fear led to anger, anger unto hate, and hate unto suffering.

But terrorism knew the first link in that chain was forged by *uncertainty*.

Catching Kharys nervously craning again, Obi-Wan cast a look back himself at his two learners— reminding him that *a lot* about this damn war just didn't add up.

There were times Obi-Wan doubted he ever would have chosen a Padawan like Anakin had not Master Qui-Gon insisted on it with his dying breath. Obi-Wan never regretted the decision, by any means. But now, thanks to Anakin, he found himself with a *second* apprentice ... every bit as unconventional as the first.

Nothing happens by accident.

Alderaanian by birth, the brawny Halagad Vantor was five years older than Anakin, just about the same age Obi-Wan had been in his last year of Jedi apprenticeship. But Vantor definitely shared a far greater affinity with Anakin in terms of temperament. Brash, stubborn, overconfident. Little wonder they had become fast friends.

Twin krayt pearls in a dragon gizzard.

Obi-Wan sighed.

Just prior to the outbreak of the clone war, during a treacherous mission to the Sith necropolis Korriban, Anakin experienced a decisive falling out with his closest Jedi Temple acquaintances: his best friend, Tru Veld, and his occasional rival, Ferus Olin. Fed up with the “Chosen One’s” recklessness, both Padawans spurned Anakin, with Ferus even leaving the Jedi Order. Into the vacuum had come Vantor.

It was ultimately the Jedi Master Ashka Boda, one of Qui-Gon’s old trusted friends, who swayed Obi-Wan to accept Commander Vantor as a temporary apprentice. While Anakin convalesced from his duel with Count Dooku at Geonosis, Master Boda had teamed with Senator Organa and the gunslinger Giles Durane to save Vantor and his original

master from a disastrous mission to Virgillia 7. But Halagad's master never made it back.

In Venter, Anakin conveniently found embodied the critical qualities of both Tru and Ferus—someone who innately understood him but also tested him.

A brother.

And for that, Obi-Wan was *very* grateful. Anakin had become considerably withdrawn since the loss of his mother ... and his right arm. *You're the closest thing I have to a father*, Anakin once told his master. But while Obi-Wan was doing his best to meet that emotional demand, a lifetime as a Jedi left him less than ideally equipped for the task. In the years since Qui-Gon's death—*since Siri's death*—Obi-Wan had burned almost all attachment from his being. Like a good Jedi.

But not Venter.

The young man was as atypical as apprentices came. Not in terms of appearance, for his nearly-two-meters height, broad build, piercing brown eyes and gaudy Medallion of Honor assured he looked every bit the heroic stereotype of a Jedi Knight. However, Venter was a product of the heterodox Almas academy, admitted into the Jedi Order at the tender age of *seventeen*. Obi-Wan, who had lived in the Jedi Temple all his life—who had nearly been *ejected* from the temple at thirteen—found that discrepancy unsettling.

But, he reminded himself, the path prescribed for some is not delineated alike for all. Anakin proved that much. Venter exemplified that inconveniently embarrassing remainder emerging from the modern Temple practice of strictly recruiting infants, free from emotional attachments, for Jedi training. As a latent Force-sensitive, Venter hadn't demonstrated Jedi potential until much later in life and was

overlooked. *Why* his telling midi-chlorian count was never tested remained a mystery. The only person who could answer that question was the Jedi Watchman responsible for the gaffe in protocol, Master Jorus C'baoth—dead five years now.

And so, instead of a sheltered upbringing at the Jedi Temple, Halagad got Okonomo.

For peaceful Alderaan, the Okonomo Tragedy had been like a nightmare from Otherspace, beyond almost all reckoning. But for Halagad, it had surely been something far, far worse.

Ventor's Jedi training was undoubtedly eclectic, but Obi-Wan had often wondered whether it was right of the Jedi to take infants from their families in the first place. In fact, Ventor's late training mirrored the Jedi Way practiced in the bygone days before the Old Sith Wars. That thought offered Obi-Wan some solace ... until he recalled that the fall to the dark side of another Alderaanian Jedi had been the very root of the Great Sith War.

Obi-Wan shook his head.

Halagad and Anakin shared an inherent bond that two normal Jedi never could: living life outside the Jedis' rules and strictures. Early in his training under Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan had briefly renounced the Jedi Order to fight in the Melida/Daan Civil War and, later, there had been that harrowing year spent on Mandalore. Though Obi-Wan found his way back to the Jedi Temple each time, the perilous experiences had given him a small but potent taste of a "normal" life, teaching him the consequences, both joyous and painful, of intimate attachment ... attachments that were to Anakin and Halagad second nature.

Obi-Wan could admit that growing up away from the discipline of the Jedi Temple seemed a concept almost impossible for him to imagine, let alone know. Yet, as he observed the spontaneous ease of the two Padawans' banter, that effortless and familiar knowing that passed between them, he also conceded that part of him would have liked to.

Obi-Wan faintly remembered a visit home to his family on Stewjon, not long after joining the Jedi Order. He vaguely recalled a mother ... and a father.

A brother. It was all so long ago. They were just fleeting images now. Feelings.

Time wasn't entirely to blame. Over the years, Obi-Wan had asked himself whether this blurred recollection was, in fact, an actual memory. Or if, instead, it was something more peculiar. A kind of Jedi vision—a premonition of the future.

Or....

Or simple longing.

Obi-Wan sighed. For, he admitted, his discomfort in taking Halagad as a second pupil was conceivably rooted in an all-together, distinctly non-Jedi sentiment....

Jealousy.

You still have much to learn, my young apprentice.

It was Qui-Gon's voice Obi-Wan heard. Yet, those niggling words were stamped into the memory of every former Jedi apprentice.

Obi-Wan wondered if Master Yoda, too, occasionally still heard them.

Returning to the here and now, Obi-Wan noticed Lord Klarymére glowering. But it wasn't at him. He followed the patriarch's critical glare to his daughter, her eyes *still* riveted on something behind them. Obi-Wan now traced the

invisible thread of Kharys' contagious gaze. But again, the only thing in the girl's line of sight seemed to be Anakin—

Oh.

"*Ahem*, Lord Klarymére," Obi-Wan said. "Tell me, what is this 'Entyrmion' you mentioned earlier?"

Klarymére shifted his disapproving eyes toward Obi-Wan.

"It is the S'kytri underworld," he said.

"A place of legend?"

"Real, Master Jedi. As real as your dark side of the Force."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "Please, tell me more."

Chapter Five

Their clone commandos dutifully resigned themselves to the prison cell at the foot of the mammoth mountain. Then, Klarymére and his honor guard bore the Jedi up an impossibly long hollow eroded through the mountain center to a point near its summit. Halagad pressed his fingers to the smoothed wall in his ascent as the tunnel pinched promptly into the narrow opening to the capital of Skye.

He had half-expected a place alive with activity, as attractive green and blue bodies bustled about, bartering for the freshly-skinned kristermet and jewelry advertised in the open-air markets, slurping annelid blorgs at the local

sustenance shops, and arriving and launching from the city's runway ledges like archaic aero-flyers. Instead, the glorious City of the Winged People bore the unmistakable blight of Zeta Magnus.

Its colorful eateries and markets were empty, the high-altitude winds whipping unimpeded through thoroughfares cluttered with the hideously desiccated deceased. Within moments, he caught the first signs of life: a group of malnourished S'kytri hatchlings slumped against a barrel-shaped domicile—every odd wing shredded, every belly fraudulently swollen. Their eyes stared unfocused with all the wisdom of mortality as Klarymère escorted the Jedi swiftly across the dead municipality.

Near the city's edge, Halagad received yet another shock. Beyond the cliff side, perched like a nest at the end of a slender stone overpass, hovered an august, vertically elliptical chamber.

"The S'kytri Council Tower," Kharys said.

As he admired the exotic champagne-colored edifice, Halagad couldn't help but notice the lack of guardrails on the bridge connecting them to it.

He turned quizzically to Kharys.

"We will catch you if you fall," she clarified.

Halagad took in an eyeful of the dizzying, multi-kilometric drop. "You're fusing my fragging bus-bars."

"It is no jest," the guardsman Aragh said. "Walkers wishing to address the Supreme Council must traverse this open-air causeway under their own power."

"I liked you better when you only spoke *your* language," Halagad said, meeting the guard's contemptuous gaze. "Well then—" he gestured the way forward gallantly for Anakin. "Lead the way. *Walker*."

“Gladly,” Anakin said.

Kenobi put a palm on Anakin’s chest as the general stepped confidently out onto the catwalk. “*I’ll* go first.”

“Don’t look down,” Halagad warned.

“I already di—”

But almost as soon as he set foot on the bridge, a powerful current slammed into Kenobi, rocking him off balance. He grabbed reflexively at the patriarch, steadying himself.

“Ah, Lord Klarymére,” the general said, peering down into the gulf again. “I’m assuming I’m not *the* first. That is, *ever* to cross this bridge.”

Klarymére sniffed. “We don’t receive many visitors.”

“Ah.”

The patriarch chirp-sissed in his natal language. From behind Kenobi, a female guard butterflied her leathery appendages around him, all but cocooning him within.

“We await you on the other side, Outworlders,” Klarymére said. Then he and his daughter were airborne, flying over the chasm to the Council Tower. With a final smirk at the flight-disabled, the retainer Aragh followed.

Meanwhile, buffeted by bludgeoning currents, Kenobi, Anakin, and Halagad each shuffled at a Hutt’s pace across the causeway, an insulating S’kytri sentry carefully shadowing each Jedi. Squinting, Halagad peered between the two fleshy, flapping green wings of guardswoman Herana shielding him from the whipping gales. Wind resounded like thunder in his ears, throwing his equilibrium. The only other sound he could hear was that of his armor squeaking with every hazardous step.

Halagad recalled the storybook of the noble “Squib Jedi” his father would read to him as a youngling, *Busteromuchmacho*

and the Arc to Infinity. In the story, the rodent warrior traversed a seemingly endless bridge between the stars, confronting one bizarre obstacle and enemy after another—a sorceress of Dathomir, a Force demon of amoral affinities, a trans-dimensional gamester of life-and-death—all in his search for the origin of the Force itself.

Compared to that, Halagad thought, *this should be a piece of glaze cake.*

He could still hear his father's voice, always starting the story the same way:

This is the story of a great warrior. His name is Busteromuchmacho, or Buster for short, and he is the smallest and bravest of all Jedi.... Ahead of him, Anakin's situation seemed even more precarious, his Jedi robes flapping wildly in the fierce drafts.

"Ani! You alright?" Halagad shouted over the winds. When he got no response, he added, "I bet you wish you wore some armor now!"

"What?" Anakin said.

"I *said*—"

"What?" General Kenobi yelled.

"Halagad!" answered Anakin.

"*What?*" Halagad replied.

"Please..." his escort Herana said, with growing impatience. "Still your tongue, before I pluck it out and feed it to my fledgling."

Before long, Halagad released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding. They had reached the other side and the stately Council Tower. He stepped onto a glowing marble-like floor, shot through with threads of scarlet and pulsing with vitality. The magnificent stone climbed toward an open ceiling with intricate arching beams carved by

masters of bewildering skill. Halagad's eye followed the rows of arches to the far end of the chamber and a conference table in the shape of half a ring. There sat the four flinty-looking members of the S'kytri Supreme Council.

And beyond them was an open portal to a breathtaking vista.

As Klarymére had explained, the S'kytri were a culture of animists, believing all things on their planet indwelt by a living essence. Now Halagad understood why. Like an unspoiled world caught in the throws of evolutionary youth, countless russet mountains thrust up all around them, stretching out with unabashed nobility. The saw-toothed panorama was intermittently cloven by deep, emerald valleys that soon disappeared behind the climb of yet another regal peak. Mirroring the mountains with an air of playful calculation, unwieldy lenticular clouds spattered the golden sky, the severity of the high-altitude winds wrangling them into imitations of stacked breakfast flatcakes.

And in spite of this vision, the Supreme Council received its guests with all the warmth that was S'kytri custom.

"*Walkers*," a female councilor spat. "I marvel you have made it this far."

General Kenobi stepped forward. "Members of the Supreme Council—"

"You will address only *me*, Nebaél, as Speaker for the council," the lime-fleshed woman said. "And you will do so once I have had my say."

The general offered a polite smile, taking a step back. "As you wish."

"It is because of Outworlders like *you*..." she began, pausing for emphasis, "*walkers* like you that we find ourselves in this very predicament. We—the *Windborn*—forced to

abandon our hallowed skies and aeries by fear of infection from Zeta Magnus' plague! Living in hiding or, worse, living on the ground like lowly Outland Clanners, in violation of everything we believe. *Daily* we suffer raids from the Magister's mutants! You say you come to help the S'kytri, but so did the Great Tyrant before erecting his citadel upon our most sacrosanct Canaitith Mountain.

"How do we know you didn't come here to steal our self-healing bloodstone, as he did?" Nebaél said, motioning to the marblesque chamber interior. "You bring your weapons, your technology, and your abominable clones, profaning our planet with your very presences. Yet you come *without* the provisions your Republic promised! Patriarch, you have sworn eternal fealty to these walkers if they can rid us of the Great Tyrant of Skye. Do you realize what a dangerous current it is along which you bear your people?"

"I know not, Nebaél," Klarymére responded. "But I will say again that if we do not accept the assistance of these Outworlders, Skye's *destruction* is assured. Witness how our slavish adherence to the old ways has betrayed us already! The ground-dwelling S'kytri Outlanders, whom our policies always favored with our choicest disdain, have been driven into the tyrant's welcoming wings and turned against us! And while Magnus' contagion swims free in our waters, our crop withers to nothing under our *proud* agricultural ignorance!"

A nervous murmur rippled through the chamber. "Are you suggesting," ventured a male member of the council, "that the Outland Clan is justified in its betrayal?"

"You speak out of turn, Lowlander Thyswar!" Nebaél said.

"What I am suggesting, stubborn fools," Klarymére said, "is that I will gladly swear our fealty to these Jedi Knights if

they can help rid us of this terrorist. What good are our inflexible laws if they result in our extinction?”

Halagad and his fellow Jedi looked on from the far end of the tower.

“Looks messy,” he muttered.

“We’re trying to help these people,” Anakin said. “Why don’t they see that?”

“I think we can help with that,” Kenobi said. “Just follow my lead.”

Abruptly, the general approached the council circle. “Speaker Nebaél!” He boomed.

Immediately, a trio of ceremonial spear tips materialized centimeters from his throat.

“He’s definitely got the accent down,” Halagad said.

“That’s why they call him the Negotiator,” Anakin agreed.

Nebaél signaled the guards to retract their weapons. “Let the walker speak,” she said.

“Speaker Nebaél,” Kenobi forged on, “and members of the Supreme Council! I am the Jedi Knight Obi-Wan of Clan Kenobi. And I would have you know that among my people, we *too* have a long history of tradition. For over a thousand generations, ones such as myself and my pupils have been the Galactic Republic’s keepers of the peace and guardians of justice.

“But over this span of time, we have found that sometimes our traditions must be *reconciled* with present realities! I, myself, for instance, have taken a vow to mentor the young men you see there. This vow is ancient and, *traditionally*, also exclusive. You see, millennia ago, during what my people call the Great Sith War, some of our number *betrayed* our brotherhood and turned to evil! What we Jedi

refer to as the dark side of the Force. Though these renegades were defeated, our masters determined that this betrayal stemmed from a flawed system of mentorship, with far too many apprentices studying under a single Master. Henceforth, a Jedi could have but *one* pupil.”

“Where is he going with this?” Halagad asked.

“I think I know.” Anakin made himself comfortable on the floor. “You remember that little trick we pulled with the Vulture droids back on Otranto?”

Halagad frowned. “I remember it didn’t *work*....”

“But, as you can *see*,” Kenobi continued, “I have not one but *two* apprentices. As you are no doubt aware, a galactic civil war has erupted, a *dehumanizing* war fought principally between droids and genetically altered clones, upending many Jedi dogmas suited to obsolete realities.

“Yet, the Jedi have a *prophecy*. That prophecy states that in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, a *Chosen One*....”

“You know,” Anakin said, “I have a really good feeling about this.”

Sitting now, Halagad inspected his hairline in his medallion. “I think he’s overdoing it.”

“You should’ve seen him on Ansion.”

“We believe,” the general continued, “that the *One* of that ancient prophecy will bring *balance* to the galaxy in a time of great crisis! We believe that time is *now*, and we believe that One is not only come, but he is *here*. Among us!”

“Showtime, Hal.” Anakin said, shaking off his robe. “Ready?”

“You mean I have a choice?”

“Just don’t drop me.”

“No promises.”

“He is *that* man, that *walker*, as you call him!” Obi-Wan concluded. “He is *Anakin*—of the clan ... *Skywalker*!”

All eyes followed the point of the Jedi general’s accusatory finger.

As Anakin rose to his feet, he caught a perplexed look from the patriarch’s daughter Kharys. He winked.

“Sky-walker?” Councilor Thyswar rasped, blurting out the word as if choking on a blorgworm.

The S’kytri at once buzzed in a flurry of their sibilant language and nervously syncopating wings.

“Do not take us for superstitious fools, Outworlder Kenobi,” Nebaél said, though her eyes flickered uncertainly to Anakin. “Of what significance is a name?”

She was about to learn.

Halagad’s eyes fluttered closed as he drew deep from the well of the Force. He felt himself going hollow—and with every centimeter of him that emptied, he felt the Force decanting into the void, pouring into him with the density of a thousand oceans. The Jedi sucked in a sharp breath as he felt himself filling—filling to bursting with the sempiternal energies of the universe.

Every space in his body ... every miniscule margin between every fiber, every micron between every cell, between every *atom* ... between every nuclear particle and every *infinitesimal* unit of essence inside him ... *flooded* with the luminous sum of all possibility—the limitless divisibility of temporal being.

And all that he was and ever might be, had been and never *would* be ... begged to unleash this unlimited potency in a naked tidal wave of absolute, uncontrollable *power*....

But the words of his former Master Everen Ettene blanketed the Padawan’s thoughts with white serenity....

Halagad, your mind is like the winds of Tatooine, flying in every direction at once. The essence of the Jedi's art is control—control of the body, control of the mind....

Control....

Halagad's breathing slowed, and his mind went quiet.

So quiet, he thought his eardrums imploded. He didn't care.

So quiet ... he barely heard the gasps—as Anakin began to rise.

His ascent was sudden, but steady.... In the Force, he appeared to Halagad a picture of composure—arms and legs spread, ever slight, approximating a star—rising at a graceful gradient toward the Council Tower's overarching beams above. His effortless climb continued past the gaping Supreme Council members and out the portal behind them.

Then, floating amidst the interminable mountain range, thousands upon thousands of meters above the indistinct ground and bathed in Marat Prime's sunlight, Anakin's body rotated with measured, millimetric precision, his dark tunic and leather surcoat flapping feverishly in the agitated winds.

As he held Anakin suspended over the precipice, Halagad slowly opened his eyes, emerging from a peace deeper than any sleep.

He wanted to smile.

He just stared instead.

Anakin ... was flying.

"By the dawn wind," Klarymére exclaimed. Halagad was aware of General Kenobi watching him closely, evaluating his strain. Using the Force to levitate a person should be no harder than levitating a big rock. In theory. But feelings of attachment between the partakers—and to oneself—had notoriously caused concentration-shattering anxiety to

overwhelm Padawan learners' minds before, ending in catastrophe. A bond of trust was vital. Halagad's body felt rigid in concentration ... but he was in control.

For his part, Anakin looked almost *too* comfortable as he cast a confident, judgmental look down on the Supreme Council members.

Then, the arrogant look faded, and his blue eyes bore directly into those of the speaker.

"Milady ... councilors," Anakin began, the words thundering. Halagad could feel Kenobi using the Force to funnel the sound waves into the chamber. "It is no coincidence that the Republic has sent us here. We walkers understand that our customs must seem strange to you. But I am a product of the kindness of strangers. Years ago, the Jedi came to my planet and saved me from slavery, committing my heart to the simple idea that if people only helped each other, there would be far fewer problems in the galaxy.

"I am here before you to repay the kindness that was shown to me—as are my Jedi brothers. I *am* the Chosen One. I am Anakin *Skywalker*. And just as my Jedi brothers and I have taken vows of loyalty to one another, we would like to swear such a vow to *your* people. A promise that, with our help, the S'kytri will once more *fly free!*"

"Speaker!" Klarymére said, flying to General Kenobi's side. "We would have your answer!"

Nebaél turned cautiously away from Anakin's hovering form, looking first toward Klarymére then to her fellow council members. All were speechless.

After only a moment, she addressed the general.

"The Supreme Council agrees to your terms, Obi-Wan of Clan Kenobi. If this prophecy of 'the One' you speak is true,

and you can rid our world of the Great Tyrant, we shall forever consider you three Jedi our wingless blood brothers.”

Kenobi bowed. “You have our word.”

“Then it is done!” Klarymére said.

Like the delicate unclenching of an overly contracted muscle, Halagad gently levitated Anakin back down to the edge of the open portal, taking a long breath once his feet touched firmly on the ground.

Kharys appeared by her father’s side. Klarymére reached into her satchel and extracted General Kenobi’s lightsaber.

“I believe this belongs to you.”

The general nodded slowly. “Thank you. Now, if you would free my clones from their detention cell.”

“They have not been uncomfortable. I’ve seen to it they have even been fed. They have large appetites.”

“But your food supply—”

“We have cast our lot with you, General Kenobi,” the patriarch said. “You are our only hope.”

“Then ... let us make haste. Tyrants are not entitled to the necessities they deny others.”

As Halagad joined them, Kharys handed him a lightsaber.

“That one’s Anakin’s,” he said. “For now, anyway.”

The girl looked momentarily confused. But when Anakin appeared next to her, she straightened quickly and surrendered the weapon.

“Thanks,” Anakin said.

“You’re welcome ... Skywalker.”

“Call him ‘Ani,’” Halagad said. “He likes it when girls call him that—seeing as it’s a girl’s name.”

“Hal?”

“Ani?”

“Shut up.” Anakin made eye contact with Kharys. “Ani’s just fine, milady.”

Kharys blushed. She dug into her bag for the remaining lightsaber and handed it to Halagad.

“Well done, boy,” Klarymére said, permitting himself to smile. “*Skywalker*.”

Anakin smiled back. “I told you I could fly.”

“Hey! I did all the piloting,” Halagad said.

To his surprise, General Kenobi laid a hand on his shoulder. “Yes you did,” he said. “That was a fine job, my Padawan learner.”

“I ... Thank you. Master Kenobi,” Halagad managed. It was the first time Obi-Wan hadn’t called him by his formal military rank. “It wasn’t easy.”

“I know. You demonstrated a much greater understanding of the subtleties of the Force.”

“Thanks. What I actually meant, though, was Mr. Chosen One here could stand going on an Ithorian diet.”

The general nodded pensively. “Confidentially, I once heard Master Yoda admit size matters just a tad.”

“Wait a minute....” Anakin flipped a recriminating hand toward his fellow Padawan. “*Hal’s* the big one.”

Kenobi stroked his beard. He then brought his hands up, palms facing each other, six centimeters from either side of his head.

“Exactly!” Halagad said. “That’s what I keep telling him!”

Anakin shook his head. “I need the Chancellor here to defend me.” He raised his chin, however, as Speaker Nebaél finally approached.

Up close, she looked somewhat infirm, the signs of malnourishment more apparent.

“Do not fail us,” she said. “Chosen One.”

“I don’t intend to, milady. But we will need your cooperation. Gather your people, and prepare for an assault on Magnus’ citadel.”

“We will need to take him by surprise,” Obi-Wan said. “Patriarch, you mentioned the Entyrmion.”

Klarymére’s expression turned grave.

“You know of the S’kytri underworld?” Nebaél asked.

“I know that it can be an asset for us,” Obi-Wan said. “If we can find a subterranean path, we can possibly avoid detection by Magnus’ spies, giving us the element of surprise.”

“The Entyrmion is a labyrinth, General,” Klarymére cautioned. “All who have entered have never returned.”

“I have.”

All turned toward the quietly confident voice. It was not Nebaél’s.

“I have,” Kharys repeated softly.

Klarymére and Nebaél’s wings stiffened noticeably. If the patriarch’s expression was serious before, it was deadly so now.

“Daughter,” he said carefully. “You know the Entyrmion is forbidden.”

“I know,” she said, meeting his searing eyes. “I *can* find the way through to the Magister’s aerie-fortress.”

The air was thick with tension. The young girl’s confidence notwithstanding, Halagad sensed Kharys’ voice carried with it an unusual *potency*....

And, perhaps, so did the speaker. “If our people can draw the main force away from the fortress...” Nebaél said.

Anakin completed the thought. “We can sneak in and neutralize Magnus.”

Father and daughter held one another's gaze. Then, at last, it was Klarymére's turn to shake his head.

"It is just as well, daughter," he said. "We have postponed your initiation rite long enough." Klarymére turned to his retainer. "Aragh, once you release General Kenobi's clones, prepare our swords. It is time to hunt."

"Yes, Patriarch," Aragh said. Yet the guard's next words chilled Halagad to the very bone. "But there's something you must know. There's been a transmission."

Chapter Six

Citizens of the Republic,

I am Zeta Magnus, Magister. I am ruler of the fifth planet of the Marat system, an Outer Rim kingdom of which, statistically speaking, you could never have heard. Suffer no shame regarding your ignorance. Expressed another way, I am—in a Republic of a thousand-thousand worlds—no one. But because I have seized control from the bigoted hegemony of infant-killers formerly in power and due to my principled nonalignment in the ongoing clone war, your Jedi Council's generals have invaded this sovereign territory to sabotage Marat's petition to the burgeoning Council of Neutral Systems, to illegally depose me, and to confiscate Marat V's precious mutable living bloodstone as a war resource. A Republic warship has already loosed a plague upon my

world, infecting two-thirds of my subjects and warping them against me. Fortunately, the offending vessel and all aboard have been destroyed, praise be to the space-gods.

Your duplicitous Jedi masters will perhaps justify themselves to you by labeling me an architect of terror, a lunatic or, worse, a Separatist. The fact is that the Marat system has never pertained to Republic space and wishes only to remain uninvolved in yet another destructive conflict of senselessly pangalactic proportion. But your so-called guardians of peace and justice seem to favor overthrowing governments whenever it suits their lust for power. That is unfortunate.

I hence hereby grant your masters twenty-four standard hours to recognize my sovereign rule. Noncompliance shall result in the reciprocal release of Jurr-5, brainrot, trihexalon-based rooze or some other mutagenic plague on a random Republic world immediately thereat and repeating every cycle thereafter.

Worry not, citizens. In a thousand-thousand worlds, statistically speaking, it will be some time before any such plagued planet or populace ranks the distinction of your acquaintance. Providing, of course, it isn't yours.

Expressing it yet another way....

Don't [expletive] with me. Or I shall return the favor.

—Zeta Magnus, Magister of Marat V

Republic HoloNet News, unspecified node
censored for replay

II

TYRANT STALKERS

Chapter Seven

Darkness, dense and suffocating, threatened to collapse on the posse of Jedi Knights, clone commandos, and S'kytri nobles as they bullied their way by foot and by wing through the ragged, uneven terrain of Skye's hidden underworld.

Their target: the Magister of Skye, the Great Tyrant ... Zeta Magnus.

The Entyrmion, as the S'kytri called this vast, claustrophobic dominion beneath the mountain ranges, revealed its secrets piecemeal. The lair's entrance was heralded by kilos of stinking skingle excrement, where generations of the flying beasts had refuged from hungry S'kytri. Not ones to let such a banquet go to waste, seething,

feasting guanomongers blanketed the dung mountain piled hundreds of meters high.

Once inside, the forbidden realm was choking in speleothem formations—at turns glassy then warty. Some stone configurations simulated chandeliers as spectacularly graceful as they were gargantuan. Others mimicked gigantic fangs lining the maw of some unholy earthen horror.

Obi-Wan and his band of infiltrators had been racing through the increasingly algid caves against Magnus' twenty-four-hour deadline, traversing the hellish underground in a vaguely diamond formation. Obi-Wan, Kharys, and Lord Klarymére made up a central horizontal rank, with a pair of clone commandos front and back sandwiching the trio between them. Completing the rhombic configuration were Anakin, taking point, and the thewy Halagad bringing up the rear. Staunching the caverns' oppressive blackness, the Padawans' lit lightsabers illumined the way ahead and behind respectively in humming glows of emerald and cobalt.

By contrast, Obi-Wan's lightsaber remained clipped at his waist. He and the S'kytri patriarch carried orange-red torches, fashioned from slow-burning blorgworm oils. In place of his ceremonial staff, Klarymére now bore a sheathed longsword slung across his back, as did his daughter—an abrogation of Skye law allowed for young flyers' rites of passage. While the naturally hyperactive S'kytri metabolism ensured Kharys and the patriarch their customary meager dress, both seemed patently uncomfortable in the Tirahnnese boots imposed on their clawed feet by the subterranean march. Similarly, while Halagad's full suit of armor kept him insulated, likewise imported vac-thermals aided Obi-Wan and Anakin in compensating against the substratal freeze.

“It’s colder than a Ninth Corellian Hell down here,” Anakin stated in a puff of frozen breath.

Directly behind him, Captain Nilo thumped his chest. “Try—” *thunkthunk* “—armor next time, sir.”

The clones of Tark Squad clutched their DC-17ms at the ready. Piercing blue-white beams from their twin helmet spot lamps stabbed forward for the caravan’s collective benefit. Meanwhile, the commandos’ metallic armors pulled double-duty, reflecting the light sources surrounding them for an impromptu, color-kaleidoscope presentation of the caves’ natural beauties.

As they shoved their way through condensed passages, avoided falling rocks and sinkholes, the Republic and S’kytri soldiers periodically encountered toppled stone towers and splattered ceiling-born missiles—evidence of the underground tunnels’ multifarious perils. Time and again, precipitous ledges forced them to break rank, and the muscular S’kytri would flit watchfully above bottomless pits in case clone or Jedi should take a bad step while creeping along. In turn, the Jedi judiciously lightsabered away bothersome rock obstructions otherwise gone unperturbed for unimaginable micronnia.

With repulsive instinct, their bodies continuously shooked themselves of invisible crawlers; some were so quick as to be only partly glimpsed, other troglodytes evolved under light-starved conditions into phantom opacity. The exceptions were the members of Tark Squad, who seemed oblivious to the nauseating flurry of creepers racing over the shells of their Katarn armor. By contrast, corpulent, whirring bloots were more agreeably tolerated. Though the stupid, thermal detonator-sized bugs jolted nerves each time they caromed

into someone, their fat and green, luminous bodies helped kindle the dark, however meekly.

Unpitying imaginations hazarded at unseen terrors as the ceaseless dripping of calcium carbonate dutifully sculpted new generations of stalactites and stalagmites. The seemingly infinite cavernous system resounded with that sometimes soothing, sometimes maddening echo.

Drip. Dripdrip. Drip.

Klarymére had thoroughly indoctrinated Obi-Wan in the legend of the Entyrmion. According to S'kytri mythology, primordial Skye was a world steeped in cataclysm, ruled by miscreation and monstrosity. Lumbering mutant blorgworms, five-headed carnivorous gogitols, and vampiric blood guzzlers were at once makers and guardians of this pandemonium. Only the heavens above remained pristine from the depravity carpeting the planet surface. And so it was that the Great Wind consorted with Canaitith Mountain, the tallest summit of the living rock, siring the S'kytri in order to defeat the demons that stalked, slithered, and prowled the loathsome world below. In the ensuing wars, the Windborn, led by Hormaket the Vanquisher, shunted all the ground dwellers into the tenebrous catacombs of the Entyrmion, where the mélange of obscenity had festered for ages ever since.

Indeed, it seemed they had happened upon such an obscenity now.

"*Pitiless* Molator," Halagad rasped. "What *is* that?"

Piled precariously beside an abyss of indeterminable depth, and savaged beyond all recognition, was a nauseatingly humanoid-sized ... *something*. The cave's industrious inhabitants carted off remarkably colorless chunks of whatever it was in diligent procession.

“Patriarch?” Obi-Wan said, turning aghast to the rightful ruler of Skye.

“Only Outlanders and fools dare this nefarious den,” Klarymére answered. “I warned you, General. We are among demons.”

“We’re coming up on a chamber network!” Anakin’s muffled voice came from up ahead. “Get Kharys up here.”

It was the patriarch’s daughter who was, in truth, leading the troop from its center. Though the clones’ wrist-mounted trackers proved competent in approximating tunnel depths, in the absence of a true penetrating tetrahertz echolocator to image the honeycombed underworld, Kharys’ memory had to do. Having frequently defied the S’kytri prohibition against entering the Entyrmion, she had the greatest familiarity with the vast cavern complex. But acknowledging the aggregate brutality of their hours without rest, Obi-Wan volunteered a better idea.

“Let’s break a moment!” He said. Upon Anakin’s halt signal, Obi-Wan turned to the clones. “Tark Squad, at ease.”

Unit leader Nilo acknowledged with nothing more than a wordless nod.

Obi-Wan didn’t entirely blame Anakin for sometimes confusing the clone troopers for something ... less human. Especially these commando units. Drilled for the most perilous covert missions, where the smallest hesitation could result in immediate death for all—or worse, mission failure—the four men were trained to act as a single entity. To that end, the commandos’ indoctrination was distinctly more merciless than the average clone trooper. That kind of training would effectively weed all laxity from any being, but that went double for soldiers sharing a genetic code down to the letter. The squad’s mission focus bordered on all-

consuming, with their personalities being the only apparent casualties.

Despite their no-nonsense demeanors, however, and unlike droids, the Tarks seemed to definitely appreciate Obi-Wan's call for rest. Their weary, bizarrely matching postures reaffirmed their humanity, even while retaining an almost canine attentiveness for danger.

Obi-Wan knew there was no such thing as luck. But he thanked the Force that he, and not the Separatists, had been the one to stumble onto Kamino's conditioned killers.

"Excuse me, Patriarch," he said.

Klarymére inclined his head in dispensation while Obi-Wan approached his commandos.

The soldiers' minds were rigidly controlled and hard to read—like their Mandalorian progenitor himself. Obi-Wan decided on a direct approach. "What is your state, men?"

"Optimal, sir," Nilo answered.

Optimal. It seemed the captain greatly favored that functional term, eschewing the more traditional, informal clone slang for positive assessments: "*One hundred percent.*" Obi-Wan waited for any form of elaboration, whether from Nilo himself or his soldiers. But only the Jedi general seemed uncomfortable with the uncanny silence that followed.

Though he knew clone officers had been cultivated for autonomy, generally even clone troopers of the line were eager to jaw with a Jedi warrior. It seemed the Tarks' *Cuy'val Dar* trainer had ruthlessly bred nearly every ounce of sociability out of the commandos.

"You're not going to remove those stifling helmets?" Obi-Wan asked. The T-visor of the clone commando headgear was *particularly* reminiscent of Jango Fett.

“Not in *this* cold,” one of them said—RC-1573, or Kupe, Obi-Wan guessed randomly. “Sir.”

“Our armor is environmentally controlled, General,” Nilo clarified.

“Then I don’t blame you,” Obi-Wan said.

Silence again. But the Jedi general still had a skifter up his sleeve.

“I couldn’t help but notice your accents. They’re not Mandalorian.” For the first time, Obi-Wan registered a hint of surprise from behind the commandos’ inscrutable masks. “Tell me, Tark Squad’s trainer, was he a Sun Guard?”

“He was, sir,” Nilo said. Rather proudly. “Sarsius Torne. Had something happened to Fett, the Grand Army of the Republic would be Thyrsonian stock instead of Mandalorian.”

“Not a bad thing,” a third clone said. Xoni—RC-1571—perhaps.

Obi-Wan recalled Senator Amidala’s former protector, Captain Panaka, once telling him about the Sun Guard of the Thyrsonian system. The soldiers of fortune were absolutely fearsome and unorthodox warriors, rumored to have built a cult around Force lore extolling a galactic savior of prophecy. And they *hated* Mandalorian shocktroopers—like Jango.

“You don’t feel a loyalty to your genetics?” Obi-Wan inquired.

“We feel loyalty to Sarsius,” Nilo said. “And the Republic, sir.” The general nodded. “Long ago,” he said, “the Jedi themselves experimented with cloning technology.”

“Sir?”

“The research was abandoned, of course. Due to Master Simikarty and others’ influential appendices to the Jedi Code.”

Nilo’s helmet bobbed.

“War always finds a way, General.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “I suppose it does.”

Chapter Eight

<Father, may I borrow your torch?>

<For what purpose?> Though he asked, Lord Klarymère eyed his daughter with a parent's knowing suspicion.

<To inspect the cavern mouths ahead with the Skywalker.>

The patriarch grimaced. <Await General Kenobi's order to proceed.>

<*Father*,> Kharys said, this time with an adolescent fledgling's reproving lilt. <This is my *Initiation Hunt*. You can't keep my wings pinioned forever.>

<No. Only until you are Matriarch.>

A flutter of her wings, and Kharys snatched her father's torch. She flew up to the crossroads and landed gingerly beside the Jedi commander staring into the darkness.

"Skywalker," she said, "you asked General Kenobi to send me?"

He turned to her. She was nearly as tall as him.

He cast the green light of his laser blade at the obscure pathways, as if selecting one for execution.

"Which one do you think, milady?"

Kharys swallowed. Handing her torch to him, she reached over her shoulder and unsheathed her sword. Surveying each of the openings in turn, she raised her weapon like Skywalker had and shut her eyes.

After a handful of seconds, she opened them again and pointed her steel confidently at the far left entrance.

"This one," she said.

"This one?"

Kharys nodded.

"How do you know your way through here?" Skywalker asked.

"I..." She looked over her shoulder toward her father.

"You've been down this far?"

"Not this far," she said. "I ... borrow the power of the Great Wind. Like you do."

"The power?" Skywalker said. "You mean the Force?"

"All power comes from the Great Wind."

"Did you use this power back in the Supreme Council chamber? To convince Speaker Nebaél to go along with our plan?" A fractional pause.

"Yes."

"I see," Skywalker said, his eyes fixing on her for just a moment. "Do you mind if I try something on you?"

Kharys' face held a question, but she felt herself nodding her head, unhesitant.

"You do mind?"

She shook her head. "No ... I don't mind."

He deactivated his lightsaber, looked around him, and secured Kharys' torch in a crevice above them.

"I don't have a midi-chlorian kit—" he said.

"Midi-chlorian?"

"Never mind. Master Justiss taught me another way to spot a strong Force signature. I'll have to use my powers to caress your mind."

Kharys' emerald lips drew into her mouth.

"Don't be nervous. It'll feel a little funny. Slightly invasive but not bad," he said. "I'll be in and out before you know it."

Kharys swallowed.

"Are you okay?" Skywalker asked.

"Yes."

"Okay ... here we go."

She expected Skywalker to reach toward her, but the Jedi's eyes simply shuttered closed. Unsure what to do, Kharys imitated him. She felt something ... invisible reaching into her consciousness, threading through her thoughts like fingertips through locks of hair. Suddenly, she could see her own psyche as if she were outside herself. She felt her own mind delicate and anxious, still developing. Pure.

Gently, she felt him probing its sinuous contours, exploring the sensitive inner space with care. She reciprocated a feeling of reassurance. She felt him move deeper into unconscious strata. Shortly, he came to a primitive and remote mental recess, finding a unique psychic knot. Her heart palpitating, she felt Skywalker brace himself, then
caress—

Instantaneously, the Force retaliated, repelling the Jedi with a staggering telekinetic blow.

General Kenobi and Commander Vantor whiplashed alarmed looks in their direction.

"What happened?" Kharys said, fear in her voice.

"It's okay..." Skywalker said, meeting his fellow Jedis' gazes with his own before raising a placating hand. *"It's okay. It's a Force reflex."*

"I did that?"

He nodded. *"You're definitely sensitive."*

Kharys smiled excitedly.

"I have one more trick!" She quickly volunteered.

She drew her green eyes closed again, and her forehead wrinkled. A gentle stir filled the empty space between her and the Jedi. She could sense a tiny cluster of microscopic particles rubbing together, faster and faster, like a burgeoning wood fire. Abruptly, a little ball of blue-yellow light blossomed spontaneously before her face.

Kharys opened her eyes, beaming at the bright bundle glowing in the air between her and the Skywalker ... his blue eyes like her father's.

"My torch ran out once while exploring down here," Kharys explained. *"I used this trick to light my way out."*

"Neat trick."

Kharys rubbed an earring as her skin shaded a deeper green. A combination of mischief and courage played on the girl's face as her gaze narrowed on the light bundle sustained aloft. Suddenly, the cluster zipped, burning a series of faint lines into the air and streaking the dim emptiness with short-lived afterglows.

She watched Anakin's face to see if he could make out her "A" "N" and "I" figures.

They were Galactic Standard letters: Aurek, Nern, and Isk.

They spelled **A-N-I**.

Skywalker smiled. "The Force is strong with you, milady."

"You can call me Kharys—if you like."

"You said the patriarch knows about your powers, Kharys?"

"My father refused to give me up for Jedi training," she said. "Because he didn't trust walkers. He said one day, as Matriarch of Skye, I would use the power of the Great Wind for the good of the Windborn."

"What did your mother say about it?"

"My mother died bearing me."

"I ... I'm sorry."

He reached forward, touching her shoulder, his hand warm.

"Thank you, Skywalker."

"Ani."

"Ani," she said. "Jedi Knights don't get to know their mothers either, do they?"

"No. Not usually," he said. "Your father was right, though. The Jedi Code prohibits us from ruling over others. Just like it prohibits attachments."

"Prohibits attachments," Kharys repeated. "Do you, do you mean like ... love?"

"Yeah, *Ani*—you mean attachments like *love*?"

Kharys froze as if she had just heard the snarl of a flesh-eating gogitol. Anakin looked up to see Halagad, who had materialized as if out of nowhere.

Inhaling sharply, Kharys bolted with a flap of wings back toward her father.

Anakin glowered at him. “You’ve got a big mouth, Nerfherder.”

Halagad laughed. “It’s called adolescence, Rimmer. She’ll get over it. Living in that chichi temple on Coruscant is making you soft.”

“Chichi?” Anakin said. “Right, because perfect, peace-loving, little Alderaan is such a backwater.”

“The stars take Alderaan,” Halagad spat. “The only good thing about that miserable planet was my pet mookas.”

“Spoiled purebreds, I bet.”

“I think you’ve confused me for Naboo royalty, my friend.”

“Watch it, Vantor.”

Anakin wasn’t just defending his absent wife. He had also sworn Halagad to secrecy regarding his marriage to the former Naboo queen. But Halagad had shared with him his own secrets: his scandalous affair with Tia Organa, his obsession to become a Jedi ... and the evil that transpired so senselessly at Okonomo.

Halagad’s parents, Ean and Zollet, hadn’t been part of Alderaan’s aristocratic upper crust. Only simple archivists working in the Royal Library. But within that shrine to knowledge, their son was inflamed with the ancient codices, stories, and ideals of the Jedi Knights. And when Alderaan’s two most powerful noble families, House Organa and House Antilles, became embroiled in a political boondoggle, he had watched dumbstruck as a delegation of Jedi, headed by the imposing Master C’baoth, deftly adjudicated the conflict. There and then, Halagad resolved to be a Jedi.

Eventually, with Ean and Zollet’s blessing, a young nobleman named Bail Prestor Organa took their son beneath his wing. Under his tutelage, Halagad vigorously pursued a

first-rate education in all manner of studies, as well as training in marksmanship, hunting, and swordplay. It was in this, Halagad's single-mindedness, that Anakin saw his own determination most sympathetically reflected.

But shared ambition alone did not forge their bond. There was, too, the Okonomo Tragedy.

Halagad had suffered the loss of both his parents in that chilling incident. And in his fellow Padawan's pain, Anakin, perhaps selfishly, found his *own* grief transfigured into something more tolerable ... along with Halagad's propensity for making light of everything.

Anakin grinned. *I bet those old, know-it-all Jedi Code commentators would fuss and grumble about selfishness serving as the foundation for a deep friendship.*

"Just remember, Skywalker," Halagad said, "I might've been born a Core World flora-hugger. But try living on Almas, pal. Force cultists, dreambeasts, Dark Tongues, K'kayeh ... we've got things there so nasty they'd make even Master Mace Windu *shee* in his Jedi robes."

"Well, now that *is* saying something."

Now Halagad froze. The unmistakable voice hadn't come from Anakin. It had come from *behind* Halagad. And it definitely, *definitely* wasn't Kharys. Anakin's grin reached ear to ear. "It certainly is, Master."

"Poodoo..." Halagad muttered, not daring turn around.

"Padawan Vantor," Obi-Wan's authorial voice came again. "I'll make you a proposition. Make it out of this mission alive, and I may spare Master Windu the details of your scatological mastery of his native Korunnai tongue."

Halagad swallowed. "Uh, that's a deal, General ... Master. Sir."

"Wizard," Obi-Wan said. "We move in five."

“That’s why they call him the Negotiator,” Anakin said.

Halagad glared daggers at him. “Could’ve warned me, laserbrain.”

“That you’ve got a big mouth? I did. Remember?”

“Alright, shut up a second. I came to talk.”

“My point exactly.”

“I felt that disturbance in the Force between you and Kharys.”

“She’s Force-sensitive, alright,” Anakin nodded. “Is that what you came to ask me?”

“Do we know that *Magnus* isn’t Force-sensitive?” Halagad asked.

“I guess not. I figure Master Windu would’ve stressed it if he thought so.”

“That’s the thing. Didn’t you hear how he emphasized one of Magnus’ aliases, ‘Saturna the *Garu*’? That doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“Should it?”

“Of course not ... you grew up in the sticks. Let me bring you up to speed, Rimmer.” Halagad leaned in. “*Garu* was the name of a Sith Lord during the Great Hyperspace War.”

“Okay...” Anakin granted. “So what? There are only so many sounds in the range of humanoid vocalization. *Garu*, *paru*, or *waru*—doesn’t mean anything.”

“Well, if you’re gonna get snippy about it.”

Anakin thought for a moment....

“*Dantooine*,” he said, snapping his fingers. “The Dantooine indigs call their witch-chieftain *Garoo*.”

Halagad’s eyebrows arched sharply. “You don’t say? And Master Windu was just *on* Dantooine.”

“*That’s* an understatement.” Mace Windu’s exploits in the war were already becoming legend. “So what are you saying? You think he was looking for Magnus?”

Halagad shrugged innocently. “Seems like a pretty big coincidence, doesn’t it?”

“You might be onto something, actually.” Anakin’s eyes focused inward. “Maybe it’s Master Windu, not the Chancellor, that wants Magnus back alive.”

“What for?”

Now Anakin shrugged innocently.

“Well, facts are facts,” Halagad said. “Here’s another one: *Magnus* is a Sith title.”

Now it was Anakin’s eyebrows that arched.

“Claimed by self-promoted rulers of the most ancient Sith. It means ‘All-Powerful’ or ‘Lord of Lords,’” Halagad explained. “In a word: Emperor.”

“So you’re saying—”

“—could Zeta Magnus be the *second* Sith?”

“The way you know this stuff, *you* might be the Sith.”

“Maybe I am,” Halagad said. “Maybe *you* are.”

The “Second Sith theory” had gained little traction since Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon Jinn fought fang-and-claw against a horned and tattooed Zabrak dervish back on Naboo. Shortly after, Padmé’s advisors had revealed overhearing the Trade Federation Viceroy refer to Qui-Gon’s murderer as *Darth* Maul. The name proved impossible to corroborate, but old hearsay about Sith always appearing in a master and apprentice pairing quickly rushed to fill the vacuum of evidence. Dooku himself had only fueled the fire when he “revealed” to Obi-Wan on Geonosis that hundreds of Republic senators were under the control of a “Dark Lord” called Darth Sidious.

The claim was, of course, absurd. Save for the likes of the hardboiled Master Vos or the iconoclastic Gokim Keeg and his churlish companion, most Jedi logically considered Dooku himself the primary suspect of his own questionable revelation.

And yet....

“Maybe Magnus is just toying with us,” Anakin said, “if he is working for Dooku.”

“Or maybe it’s the count who’s getting played.”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

Halagad glanced at his chrono. “We’d better. Before Magnus makes good on his promised death spree.”

“Let’s move.”

Chapter Nine

One by one, they made their way through the passageway prescribed by Kharys. The tunnel was a tight fit. Following last, Halagad found it necessary to deactivate his lightsaber as the area contracted. Darkness immediately flooded in.

He was surprised the commandos, oversized armor and all, seemed to wriggle through the tight crevice with relative ease. He had read reports that some clone troopers displayed symptoms of claustrophobia in cramped quarters. Something in Jango Fett's DNA.

But if the constricted space was having any effect on them, the Tarks weren't letting on. Useful things, those helmets; Halagad himself had no such fortune. His armor

scraping and his cloak catching again and again on stony protrusions, he kept shoving himself by fits and starts through the lightless passage.

It's only in the dark that we're all alone together....

He remembered first hearing the words sung by his mother. They made up the first line of an old Alderaanian children's chant. But though his mother sung the song ... it was always Tia's voice he heard.

Tia, who had one night whispered it in his ear. Tia ... whom he had left behind just when she needed him the most. *Hypocrisy suits you, you know that?* Anakin had only been kidding when he said that ... but maybe Ani wasn't wrong.

But I didn't know....

Halagad felt himself becoming slightly lightheaded. He clutched his medallion ... earned for his actions on Virgillia 7 ... for failing, in essence, to save his master. He heard his breathing shallowing. His face felt cool ... wet. His boots, his armor were tighter. The walls were slick with moisture. Or were his palms sweating? His clothes and armor were feeling heavier. Hotter.

...Suffocating.

Halagad's mind folded back on itself. He thought of that fateful day on Alderaan. He'd been hunting manka cats with Prestor and Tia, while his parents enjoyed a rare stay at the luxurious Okonomo Retreat....

Why wasn't I there.... Halagad had a bad feeling since arriving on Skye. He now felt the hole in his heart winching open, puckering like a hungry mouth. His stomach twisted. He felt his throat constricting....

Constricting....

It's only in the dark that we're all alone together....

I am the Dark, you see, and I'll be with you forever....

Light exploded in Halagad's face.

"A little help, sir?"

As the helmet-mounted spot lamp practically blinded Halagad, a gloved hand extended from the darkness. Halagad tentatively assigned the disembodied extremity to RC-1572, Quo, though he couldn't be sure.

Halagad accepted the proffered help. A measure of grunts and crumbling rock later, the commando had yanked him free.

"Thanks," the Padawan said.

He was about to boast about how real men did their asphyxiating in deep space, when his breath abruptly caught in his throat.

"By the Force..."

Chapter Ten

Its natural beauty rivaled the jungled Ithorian herdships, its elegant architecture any cathedral of G'aav'aar'oon.

Obi-Wan stared in awe. Before them, emitting a kind, natural glow and cluttering their vision to capacity, unraveled a crystalline maze. Immense overlapping crystal columns, each thicker than the next and all run through with jagged veins of scarlet, crisscrossed the exotic alabaster gallery in a mesmerizing display. A forest of white obelisks stabbing in from every conceivable angle. The entire chamber seemed to throb with life as its generous incandescence ebbed and grew in time to the pulsing seams. A faint scent like aging mint percolated toward them.

“It’s gypryst,” Kharys said. “The living bloodstone. I’ve never *seen* so much of it!”

“The vibrant rock from the Council Tower,” Halagad said. “Stang ... I bet someone could make a real fortune smuggling this stuff.”

“I dare someone to try,” the girl countered. “You wouldn’t want to face a S’kytri hunting party.”

“Such sublimity...” Lord Klarymére said, torch shadows playing upon his face. “I never imagined such a thing could exist so far beneath the stars.”

“It’s practically like Ilum,” Anakin remarked. He wiped his brow. “Only warmer.”

It wasn’t just him. Even the walls and crystal columns were sweating. Though the formations resembled ice, that seemed a certifiable impossibility. The frigid cave temperatures here yielded to an utterly stifling humidity. A *deadly* humidity, Obi-Wan realized. They needed to mobilize.

“Let’s admire as we go,” he said.

“I don’t think we’re too far off,” Kharys said.

Extinguishing their light sources, they continued cautiously through the slippery and sweltering crystal maze. Stepping carefully, they avoided sharp sheets of crystal like menacing bloodfin teeth jutting all around them, leaning on the bulky gypryst pillars for support. The compliant raw material readily acquiesced to its reputation, molding itself subtly to the passersby’s touches, leaving distinct handprints in the living rock.

Still, their boots had crunched through only a few dozen meters of the exotic, muggy environment when Anakin halted them. “Back up. This way’s a dead end.”

“Can’t you cut through it?” Kharys asked.

Anakin evaluated the multi-ton bloodstone matrix. “Not without risking a collapse.”

“We won’t last another thirty minutes in this boiler,” Obi-Wan said. “We may need to find an alternate path.”

“What’s the hold up?” came Halagad’s muffled voice. *“If we hurry, we can still make Dex’s for a Raxus slider.”*

“This is the way,” Kharys insisted.

“If you’re wrong, young one....” Klarymère moved up beside her. “Have faith in my daughter’s judgment, Jedi,” he said. “She is young but ... insightful.”

“I know,” Anakin said. He turned to Obi-Wan, and the general nodded.

Anakin sparked his lightsaber between his flesh-and-metal hands, set to shear his way through, when Kharys grabbed him.

“Stop...” she said. “I sensed something.”

“What is it?” Anakin asked.

“My stomach,” Halagad said.

“There!” Kharys shouted.

There ... in a crevice, camouflaged by the clutter of bloodshot beams, its chitinous integument a disturbingly deep, purplish-red—silently slurping the rich, vital fluids from a lifeless, tangerine-fleshed S’kytri Outlander cradled in two of its four crab-like hooks—there, hunkered a thing sprung from lunacy and impossibility.

The humpbacked horror, easily three meters, bore resemblance to the aborted offspring of a gundark and a block of concrete. Two massive, two-toed hooves supported beefy legs built like wroshyr trunks; hemorrhaging from every centimeter of its prodigious torso were thousands of thorny edges; and protruding like arachnid legs was a quartet of swollen, scaly arms, two to a side, tapering delicately at the

elbows into four keen scythes. Dropping its meal, the creature, more nightmare than anything else, scissored together its fore-claws, as if sharpening them, and turned to face them.

Then the nightmare's most disturbing quality of all made itself known.

It *had* no face.

Lacking, in fact, was anything remotely resembling a head. Instead, its humped back erupted into a tri-fold neck like a series of layers encrusted one atop the other upon being vomited forth from its conveniently splayed gullet. Rimming the creature's only obvious orifice, arranged like the petals of a purple passion, were dozens of undulating stubs, each hungrily quivering node with its own tiny sucker, slick with a syrupy cruor concoction.

Kharys inhaled sharply. "The *Oskans*...."

"The *what*?" Obi-Wan said.

"*Blood eaters*."

"No," Klarymère corrected. "The wicked insanity of Zeta Magnus."

As the beast scrutinized them, strings of mucousy crimson dribbled in long, sticky strands from its sickle limbs and volcanic, vaguely trapezoidal maw....

"General—" Nilo suggested.

...*Like the Galactic Standard letter "o"—Osk*, Obi-Wan thought absently. *A tyrant with a sense of humor*.

"General!"

Through the haze of implausibility, Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber.

"Yes." The Jedi general obliged.

And every dead and living thing shuddered as the blood guzzler roared its guttural ultimatum, drowning out the

frantic shout of orders, the brandishing of swords, and lightsabers blazing to life.

A blizzard of commando blaster fire converged on the mammoth beast even as the Jedi charged when, without warning, cries from Kharys and a clone soldier pealed through the cavern as they disappeared in two more sets of pincer clutches and hungry howls.

“Kharys!” Klarymére screamed, and the patriarch took to the air.

And just as the Jedi were upon the first horrid beast ... a half-dozen more connoisseurs of gore joined it from the crystal maze.

Grinding to a halt, Obi-Wan unleashed a turgid, quadruple-jointed Toydarian curse.

That nearly scared Anakin and Halagad worse than the blood eaters.

“I didn’t know you had it in you,” Anakin admitted.

“The Force,” Obi-Wan confessed, “helps Jedi to transcend their limitations.”

Halagad kissed his medallion. “Damn straight.”

And the three Jedi let fly against the wall of red death.

Elsewhere, the blood eater that grabbed up Quo tried its damndest to quarter the clone with all four of its unnatural appendages. But the reinforced duraplast armor held, and the commando spat a flurry of rounds from his DC-17m into the creature’s hoofed feet. The beast dropped him, and the clone immediately turned round and, incredibly, scaled the thing’s back, fleet as a monkey-lizard, pumping a staccato fury down its yawning mouth.

Two of his brothers now joined the fray with distinctive *shnnk* sounds. With vibroblades unsheathed from wrist gauntlets, commando Kupe chopped at the Oskan like a

champion shockboxer, hacking at the likeliest spots to harbor the monster's heart, if it had one, or otherwise spill its viscera. More pragmatic, his sibling Xoni rolled and sliced into the creature's heel with precision swipes, severing its supportive tendon. Like a giant Kashyyyk hardwood, the creature came crashing down to the tune of its own bawling howl.

Nearby, Nilo narrowly averted his own blood sucker ambush, jumping away as the beast chopped down with all its filleting arms. Mid-leap, the commando captain wheeled on his attacker and hammered his right forearm with his opposite hand. Boiling copper flamed from his gauntlet, bathing the beast in a shower of fire.

Waging her own life-and-death struggle, Kharys wrestled to escape her abductor's hold. But the beast's strength was monumental, and she swiftly learned the dire consequences of struggling. The creature's razor-grip sliced into her thigh, and blood gushed from the rent flesh. She screamed as the sweet sanguineous scent sprinkled the air, instantly whipping the blood eater into a lusty frenzy.

Meanwhile, the Jedis' lightsabers spun in a synergistic choreograph of dismemberments and eviscerations, their wildly unappreciative accomplices in this dance of death braying shrieks of violent disapproval.

And as Kharys' second cry pierced his ear, Anakin could no longer refrain from instinct.

"*Master!*" He shouted.

Obi-Wan knew it was useless to try and stop him.

"Go to her!" He said. "We've got this!"

Virtually buried in blood eaters, Obi-Wan's claim was dubious at best. But Anakin allowed himself to believe it. And with a final, double-underhanded swing—more an Endorian lumber-jack's caber toss than a saber stroke—the

Chosen One bifurcated the blood drinker before him, groin to gullet, sprinting back for Kharys even as its spilling entrails rosied the ivory ground.

The column-crowded cave hampered an airborne Klarymére's ability to maneuver. But no matter. As the blood eater threatened to dice his daughter into meat ingots, the patriarch dove and chopped down with all his might. Red chunks of chitin popped into the air as his sword edge sunk clean into the beast's meaty right shoulder, leaving its immense uppermost blade-arm hanging useless from tendons.

Kharys didn't hesitate. Sacrificing two fresh gashes to her arm and torso, she wriggled just enough to reach back and unsheathe her own blade. Slipping it into a reverse grip, tucking her left arm behind her back, and clutching the interfering leather of her wing between her legs, she shoved down with all her might.

The durasteel plunged deep. The monster bellowed as the blade plowed through its bloated chest, exiting its back coated in black plasma. At the same time, Klarymére jammed his sword into the creature's arched back and—*twisted*. The blood eater roared, lashing out in an erratic fury. Unbelievably, the patriarch's royal blade snapped. Evading a string of wild swipes, Klarymére flew to safety just out of the blood sucker's reach.

When suddenly he felt an unexpectedly hard pinch.

Klarymére thought he heard Kharys call in S'kytric, "*Father.*" For a second, he felt stunned, and made an instinctive effort to shift the direction of his flight. His right wing batted, but his left wing seemed pinned. He realized then that, though suspended in the air, he was not moving.

And so, yielding to intuition, the patriarch looked down.

Lord Klarymére confirmed he was still airborne. It was just that a thick, carmine wedge had ripped through his back and was jutting from his chest.

Oblivion closed in on the S'kytri patriarch as, baying its triumph, the Oskan to which that jutting claw belonged waved its spitted supper about like a carnival prize.

But the demon would not savor its spoil for long.

Chapter Eleven

Consider....

A creature of the most primitive instinct, little more than a mouth, a mass of muscle, and a snarl of nervous tissue dissimulating for a brain, the headless Oskan blood eater is bio-engineered to be nothing more than a hematophagous eating machine. Unremittingly faithful to its synthetic constitution, this mindless, murderous thing is incapable, really, of appreciating either instant or incident of any portion of its guileless existence. Its aforesaid victory revelry is actually only a series of involuntary spasms, void of either meaning *or* savor, predetermined by the beast's artificial molecular signature and (it could be said) plausibly

predetermined by any relevant metric of cosmic or existential breadth.

...It is thus that, as the blood eater feels the slightest, subtlest pinch in the general precinct of what passes for its abdomen, it also doesn't apprehend, even for the slightest, subtlest second, the imminence of its predestined demise (which, it may now be said, is as thoroughly devoid of meaning as this creature's life). To say nothing of its poetically just impending mode of death—a la lightsaber shish kabob.

Now, *that* shee is funny....

Chapter Twelve

The jade tip of Anakin's lightsaber *melted* through the exuberant Oskan's middle back, broiling through its guts and out the abomination's protuberant belly.

For a second, the faceless beast actually appeared to look down to survey the damage.

Anakin wasn't finished. As if uncorking a vintage bottle of Deltron spice wine, he proceeded to carve his way out of the blood guzzler, screwing his lightsaber clockwise through the sinewous muscle in an ever-widening swirl until chopping messily out the brute's side.

Eviscerated beyond all courtesy, the demon toppled.

Still captive, Kharys watched as her father's impaled body crumpled to the ground along with his executioner. Pain. Pain and desperate rage flooded her. Again, she drove the tip of her own blade into the blood eater intent on making a meal of her, this time twisting the gash open, causing the creature to release her at last. Using both hands, she wrenched her weapon from the beast's heart with a wet squish. Then, taking to the air, she sunk her sword into the thundering, quivering gullet, silencing it forever.

<Father!> Kharys said, flying over to his still form.

Meanwhile, two blue blades flashed in eloquent rebuttals as Obi-Wan and Halagad—exhausted, claret-stained, and soaked in sweat—stabbed, hewed, and slashed through living mountains of murder, matching their blades against shredding limbs anxious to hatchet them into tender mince. Tons of glowing stone collapsed haphazardly around them, fraternizing freely with strewn hunks of squirming flesh, steaming sides of raw meat, and heaps of trunk-like limbs.

Seemingly understanding the purpose of the armor Halagad and Obi-Wan wore, the blood suckers switched tactics and turned their blade arms to decapitation. But when Halagad pivoted to intercept a pair of the horizontal guillotines, the unthinkable happened: his lightsaber sparked and the blue blade vanished ... succumbing to the unsparing cave heat and moisture.

Halagad backpedaled, slipping on a clot of carnage just as the scything blades reached him—crying out as he felt the slashes cut almost to his neck, slitting his face and forking his ear. Beside him, Obi-Wan, in a two-handed grip, swung his lightsaber through a fiendish arc, hacking clean through the limbs up the creature's right side, riving through double armpits, and following an invisible curve through its

nonexistent neck and down through the twin appendages on its other side. The carnage was so precise, he affected less a warrior than a deft artisan pruning away the offending excess of an unfinished sculpture.

Unimpressed, the Oskans kept coming.

As Nilo finalized his own bloody work of art, he looked up to see the fatigued Jedi thick in melee, verging on overwhelmed. Virtually without thinking, the clone commando reached for the small of his back.

“Commanders!”

Obi-Wan and Halagad spared a hasty glance. Enough to spot the fist-sized silver sphere in the commando’s hand.

“*Move!*” Nilo yelled.

Channeling the Force, the Jedi catapulted away as Nilo lobbed the thermal detonator into the huddle of slaughter-slurping juggernauts.

The sphere landed with a *chunk* on the blood-blotted floor.

Then, it detonated.

Contrary to every expectation, there was no fiery explosion. Yet, the devastation wrought was no less cataclysmic for it. With an efficacy so total it left mortal minds at a loss of comprehension, everything—*everything*—within an absolutely perfect five-meter radius from the detonator was absolutely and summarily vaporized. Hundred-ton crystal columns, the Oskan horde, their hacked-off limbs, and the very air *itself*—all gone. In their place was only a five-meter-deep depression, ten meters across, as if the spot had been carved out by a behemoth ice cream disher ... and a cold, cold preternatural void of unfathomable *emptiness*.

A psychic exsanguination—a “blood stain” marking a heinous violation of the Force.

Pillars caught in the eradicating cocoon briefly flaunted pristine cut crescents before crashing in submission to their violate configurations. A macabre, perfectly preserved third of a blood eater, caught at the edge of the blast radius, twitched on the cave floor for a pair of heartbeats before ceasing all movement.

Sweating like pigs, hearts thundering, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Everyone ... except Obi-Wan.

"*Captain!*" The Jedi general barked. "That was a *Class-D detonator!* NOT Republic standard issue!"

The clone commando seemed taken aback. "Cool yourself, sir," Nilo said. "That was our only one."

But Obi-Wan *wasn't* cooling down. "Do you understand what you've done?!" He demanded.

"Disruptor-grade ordnance is *outlawed under galactic law!*"

Like a stone wall, the soldiers of Tark Squad were suddenly standing shoulder to shoulder with their captain. Identical but for the Oskan protoplasm spattering their armors.

"Dead is dead in the end. General."

"*Class-D annihilation* isn't *death*. It's an affront to life *and the Living Force itself*."

"Covert ops is a dirty business. We only use the ordnance we're given," the clone captain returned ... a little too calmly. "You might be grateful I wasn't aiming for you. Sir."

If not seething already, Obi-Wan was now absolutely livid.

"You will immediately *cease* and *abstain* from use of disruptor-grade arms for not only the rest of this mission, *Captain*, but the duration of this Force-forsaken war!" He said. "Or I'll see you *court marshaled*."

When he received no acknowledgment, Obi-Wan stalked up and jammed his finger in Nilo's face.

"Is that order *clear*, Captain? *No disintegrations?*"

For just a moment, Obi-Wan flashed back to that stare-down on Kamino with the clones' prime donor Jango Fett, seeing the bounty hunter's hard, cynical features behind the commando's unreadable T-visor. At last, Nilo replied.

"As you wish, General."

Clones, Obi-Wan reminded himself. *Clones ... not Jango.*

And then, in the ensuing silence, a small, persistent, and pitiful sound became suddenly, pitilessly clear.

"Master," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan turned toward the plaintive sound to see what he already knew.

Only, it wasn't what he'd expected. It was much, much worse.

There kneeled Kharys. Drenched in sweat and tears, covered in gashes. Blood seeping from her wounds, tattooing her pale lime flesh in jagged streaks, painting the cavern floor droplet by droplet. Her sword at her side, blackened by blood eater innards.

There lied Klarymère. His head on his daughter's lap, dead or dying, lying awkwardly on his side. A giant, crimson and amputated chitinoid appendage, haphazardly hewed from its owner, chewing through the patriarch's chest like an overgrown rancor tooth, petalling his blue flesh like a budding everlily. Kharys' tears bathing his face, drop by drop, snaking their way into his parted lips.

Klarymère's mouth moved ... tasting death.

"O ... Obi-Wan," he said.

The Republic general crouched beside him.

For a long, long time, Klarymére said nothing. Then, his lips worked ... spitting out a last command from a place beyond self-consciousness. Beyond refusal.

“Magnus ...” he said, “must die.”

Obi-Wan blanched.

For an instant, he saw Qui-Gon’s face.

“We will ... do what we must,” Obi-Wan promised.

The patriarch’s blue eyes moved infinitesimally.

“Sky-walker....”

“Yes...” said Anakin softly. “We promise you.”

Awareness fled Klarymére’s gaze, and Kharys screamed uselessly for her father.

But from that place beyond awareness, Klarymére surrendered to her his last.

<Daughter,> he whispered. <You will be ... a great matriarch.>

Then the Lord of Skye exhaled the patent breath of annihilation—and became everything.

Chapter 13

For a time, Kharys simply cradled her father's head and wept.

The lurid dark still flowed from his body, draining the vivid color from his light azure skin, the blood seeping over her legs, coating them in sticky warmth. Kharys sealed her mind shut from the possibility of all thought. Time for her had no substance. Death had no meaning. There was only the vulgar beating of her heart. Her heart, tearing with despair, hemorrhaging with pain.

Singing with the agony of—
—love.

Love.

Wordless, the girl cupped her hands beneath her father's head and, with immeasurable delicacy, placed him on the crystal floor.

And even before she did it, General Kenobi knew what she was going to do next.

"Don't," the Master Jedi said.

But Kharys had already taken up her sword, baptized in blood eater plasma, and stalked forward to finish what she'd begun.

There lied the culprit. Her father's killer. Kharys judged the expired Oskan with dead, unfeeling eyes.

"Anakin..." Commander Vantor said.

But Ani made no move to deter her from her grisly responsibility.

Again. Again. And *again*—her sharp blade chopping down like an axe, severing arm from torso, hacking spine from muscle, hoof from leg.... And *again*—splitting the beast's chest open, cleaving its gullet in twain, slicing off sucking stubs.... And *again*—filleting every centimeter of the beast with a vitality uniquely adolescent, the serum of obsidian Oskan blood, mingled with that of its victims, flying hot in sublime arcs, dousing the young destroyer without regard to decency or irony, peppering her face, her eyes, her teeth, her legs and arms and hair.

And as she arched her sword back overhead to continue the perpetual slaughter, an unbreakable hold clamped her wrists.

Teeth clenched and lips curled in rage, Kharys whirled on the intruder.

"Enough," Vantor said, pinching together her wrists in a thewy grip.

A brief contest ensued, Kharys trying desperately to wrench herself free of the burly Jedi's hold. She bared her teeth, verging on biting herself free ... but at last, exhaustion pried unwilling fingers open, her gore-slick instrument of reconciliation slipping from her grasp and *chudding* on the sanguine-sopping ground.

She slumped in the Jedi's rigid hold.

"*Hal,*" she heard Ani say, his voice barely controlled.
"*Let. Her. Go.*"

Chapter 14

Anakin watched the nightmare unfold, unable to move. Unable to deny Kharys her sacred right to justice—however barbarous. To slaughter her father’s murderer like the evil, unthinking animal it was. Life, death, and the Force ... needed to be endlessly balanced.

But as Halagad intruded on Kharys’ retribution, something deep in Anakin, something primordial, flared. As Halagad pinned the girl’s wrists, holding her helpless, like some prize catch, Anakin felt that uncontrollable *dragon* of scarlet emotion—the one that almost consumed him on Zonama Sekot, years ago—coming alive....

ANAKIN! ANAKIN, NO!

Through gritted teeth, he ordered, “Let her go.” But Halagad didn’t do that. Instead, his best friend looked hard at him, Halagad’s posture naturally angling up his chin in challenge....

A surge speared through Anakin. He remembered Halagad telling him how he deserted Tia Organa....

And the image of Padmé, hanging helpless, suddenly replaced Kharys. And then—

Mom....

But before Anakin’s hand reached his lightsaber, Halagad carefully lowered Kharys’ limp form—allowing her body to crumple atop her pool of vengeance.

With crushing relief, Anakin felt the dragon inside him subside.

He turned to Obi-Wan. His master was shaking his head.

A clone voice called from up ahead. “Commanders ... come have a look at this.” Anakin stayed where he was as Obi-Wan and Halagad made their way over to the commando. But even from where he was standing, he could see what the clone was pointing to.

The collapse caused by the *Class-D* detonator had opened a giant hole in the cavern roof. Above hovered the night sky ... filled to bursting with the fires of a hundred billion stars.

“We’ve triangulated, double, and triple checked the coordinates, sirs,” Nilo said, again the perfect model of professionalism. “That’s Canaitith Mountain directly above us.”

The highest peak on Skye. And marring it like an illegitimate crown, Zeta Magnus’ castle.

Kharys had guided them true.

“It’s time,” Obi-Wan said.

He turned to Halagad. And they both turned to Anakin.

Grimacing, Anakin moved toward Kharys' rumpled form. "Kharys," he said, slowly holding out his hand.

Her sad, stained face looked up at him. A dark, pear-shaped blotch—an exploded blood vessel—hung just beneath her eye.

Anakin opened his hand ... showing her a comlink unit.

The collapsed opening had re-enabled their short-range communications.

Kharys just stared at the unit.

Then, gently, she took it, and flicked it on.

"Aragh. Aragh, this is Kharys," she called hoarsely. "Answer me."

Silence reigned. She depressed the switch to try again.

"*Milady*," a voice burst back over the link. "*Are you safe?*"

"I am."

"*Where is the patriarch?*"

"Our patriarch ... is borne by the Great Wind."

Kharys waited. There was no response.

"Retainer—"

"*He was a father to me in all but name. I am sorry, girl*," Aragh sputtered. "*Nonetheless, I don't believe this news should be shared with our people until after our assault ... if there is still to be one.*"

"It was my father's dying request," she confirmed. "Initiate attack plan: *Vožburk*."

Vožburk. The archaic term for all-out war between the Windborn and the ground-dwelling demons of Skye.

"Our steel and talons shall rend flesh within the hour," Aragh said.

The communication cut off.

"Milady..." Anakin said.

Kharys handed him the comlink.

“It is blasphemous for the patriarch of the Windborn to die in this accursed, skies-forsaken underworld,” she said, blending blood and tears as she wiped the pain from her face. “I must get my father to Mount Krisklar immediately, where skingles may eat out his heart, eyes, and liver in respectful fashion.”

As the girl scooped up her father, Halagad nudged Anakin.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Anakin looked away only with great difficulty. But when he finally turned toward his friend, his eyes went wide.

Halagad was holding the right side of his blood-soaked head, as if damming his brain from spilling out. Long, red rivulets streamed down his neck and disappeared beneath his armor.

Halagad extended his other hand in a closed, bloody fist. As he opened it, Anakin held his breath, half-expecting to see the torn mass of an ear.

Instead, there was a tightly wound lock of hair.

“My Padawan braid,” Halagad said. “Kriffing blood eater sliced it off.”

Anakin breathed. “Think of it as a promotion, Nerfherder. You were never going to make it to knight any other way.”

“Rot in space, Ani.”

“Magnus first.”

“Captain,” Obi-Wan said. “Would your men please provide some of their painkillers and gauze to Commander Vantor.”

“Sir.”

As Kharys walked toward them with the patriarch in her arms, Anakin said the only thing he could think to say.

“Thank you ... Kharys,” he faltered. “And ... may the Force be with you.”

Her heartbroken eyes met Anakin’s. Those seas of green pleading for him to come with her.

Guilt squeezed Anakin’s heart. And he recalled those cruel words of Master Qui-Gon, a decade past. About how he hadn’t come to Tatooine to free slaves ... nor save a boy without hope or his poor mother.

Anakin didn’t understand the Jedi Master then. But the Chosen One, with millions of S’kytri depending upon his powers, now knew the bitter truth....

He was right.

And when Anakin made no move—not to help the girl, not to leave with her, not even to hold her—Kharys’ gaze at last flashed, conclusive and condemning.

Taking them all in, eyes blurred with accusation, she declared, “The Entyrmion take you all.”

With heavy heart, Anakin watched, along with his Jedi brothers and the commandos, as Kharys shot through the ceiling opening with her father—transformed by her Initiation Hunt, in these short hours, from an adolescent girl into a broken angel.

“Gentlemen,” Obi-Wan sighed. “We have one hell of a climb ahead.”

INTERLUDIUM

I am Zeta Magnus.

I am an experiment.

I began life as nothing—nothing of consequence, to be sure. Only an idea. But thoughts are things, and Arkanians never do anything by halves. Not when it comes to science.

When the Arkanian Renegades built their Assimilators, cyborg warriors capable of reconstructing themselves with near anything—including the body parts of their prey—the Dominion's scientists all but smiled, answering with their own xenobiological pastiche. Splicing their own genetic

sequences with those of ogrish Yaka, degenerate Rakghouls, pluri-interface Amorphiian androids, scoria-eating dianoga and other offal of damnation, the Arkanian Dominion bred the most exquisite monsters ever conceived. The Accelerated Transgenic Heuristic Abhorers: savant abominations synthesized to seek in lust and destroy with relish.

I am such a monster.

My dimensions alone qualify me for the title. At not quite four meters, I have given even feral rancors pause. But I have also rightly earned this epithet by my works—as testified on countless worlds by moribund screams in a hundred alien tongues. I have taken the time to memorize the languages of each and all my victims—the process demands but a few hours, akin to my learning the Mawanese vioflute, the drumheller harp, or Zeltronian lute. I *love* the string. But my heart delights in my B'omarr pipe nalargon best. It's said none outside the B'omarr creed have tamed this engine of unfaithful rhapsody. But I have.

For I am a genius.

I didn't ask for this intellect. And the gods, could they exist, are likewise exempt of blame. The Arkanian technolords, perverse experimenters all, are the ones that elevated my intelligence quotient to obscene heights with their noological implants. Now, I kill time abstracting myself in the poetry of metatemporal algorithms and the soft familiarity of hyperdimensional dreams.

Our war with the galvanic-born Assimilators was violent, calculated, sadistic ... succulent. But after the revolution was put down, the Arkanian Dominion systematically and unsympathetically destroyed all my miscreated brethren. I alone escaped, the first and last of my kind, lost and filled to bursting with an unnamed desire. For a time, the Dominion

regularly dispatched its rangers after me, but ceased upon my consistent, diligent return of their disembodied remains. Murder came naturally to me, but against these common non-regenerating organisms, these *people*, the activity betrayed itself as all together monotonous. Too *predictable*.

It was, therefore, not long before I discovered the piquant spice of methodical, conscienceless vengeance.

After digesting my creators, I again found my unnamed lust unrequited ... until I coupled my affection for bloodshed with the most vermiculate of all entities.

Time.

I have rapined about the galaxy for three decades, from the galactic fringes to its deepest core—learning what I required, taking what I desired. First, I destroyed with random abandon, discovering next the nuanced and refined pleasures of premeditation. But it was while dining on the cerebral cortex of the penultimate of my creators that I was struck in a flash with the true meaning, and pleasure, of terror.

Time—*infinite* time. Torture could be *excruciating*, death manufactured on scales of *epic*. All that was required—tetradimensional singularities notwithstanding—was *sensible* deference to *time*. This pleased me. A slave force was easy to muster, as I was persistently followed by admiring savages, scientists, and sages alike, drones of every stripe desperate for something to believe in, ready to project onto me the stigma of all manner of inchoate nonsense. With their devotion, I was able to carve a kingdom from the furthest reaches of the galaxy. Of course, it is no small task to be counted a colossus among the rulers of the unknown. I have faced no shortage of curiosity from my eclectic neighbors: nagging Vagaari and Ebruchu pirates, a sapient blob and schizophrenic bio-ship

from the void, to say nothing of the Ascendancy and Shreeftut's Imperium. But I staked my claim and stood my ground. Charming, my "Dark Worlds" were even "blessed" with a religious dispensation from those self-important Rhandite nihilists. Now, my kingdom exists as a monument to my obsession to find that nameless thing I pine to find.

And at last, I have found it.

For, alas, I am dying.

My affliction is neither wound nor sickness. My affliction is, rather, sheer genetic perfection. No wonder the Dominion ceased pursuit of me, for it built its monsters to last only so long. And I, being what I am, find myself at the appointed hour.

Time, at last, is killing *me*.

But I know I was not born to die. The essence of all living things is not some invisible, mystical energy. It is small, yes, but it is concrete, real and, most importantly, *immortal*. I speak not of midi-chlorians, which, like all life-forms, are ultimately but its progeny; I refer instead to that primordial particulate which is deathless.

DNA.

The Arkanians saw to it that my kind would not be capable of natural reproduction. Even so, an absence of genitalia is no great impediment. Like my blood eaters, it would be child's play to gestate a clone of myself. Surely, I could then flash-pump my memories into this creature. Yet, that creature, physically and mentally identical to me though it may be, would surely not be me. I have little use for metaphysics, but none for stupidity. A thing *I* create, which *thinks* itself me, is not *me*—the laughable quantum postulation that prostitutes my duplication into a probabilistically false infinitude of realities be damned as well. Time and

microscopic anarchy have conspired to yield the plethora of all existence, granting living matter perpetuity at the scant expense of the ego's continuity.

My consciousness, thus—regrettably—is not wedded to my genetic code.

But it may yet be.

For I have struck a deal with a Dark Lord.

The man—and he is but a man—professes to have unlocked the *secret of immortality*, confiding in me he intends to thereby prolong his life for a thousand, even ten thousand years. And he has *promised* me this secret, in exchange for my depraved talents.

The Sith is amusing. He fancies himself a god. But so did my Arakanian mothers and fathers, prior to their metabolism within my small intestine.

Duplicity is an obvious concern ... I trust the Dark Lord even less than my makers. But I saw the arrogant certainty in his eyes and know this: the Dark Lord *believes*, absolutely, that *he* will live forever. Though I am a born skeptic, I have witnessed the things those calling themselves masters of the Force can do. It is these combined conditions that have provoked my wager on the Dark Lord's game. Whether he knows it or not, the Sith has secured my fate. For he has made me a promise, and if he does not grant me intelligence everlasting, I shall at long last name my life's nameless purpose.

To kill the Dark Lord before I die.

And so, I have aided his Confederate stooges in contriving the corrosive stone mite and blue virus plagues, provided his cyborg supreme commander with samples of my mutagenic 3L41UH7 serum, and granted Count Dooku access to my Wayland facility for his dashta tissues and

shadow army. After all, I still control my accelerated GeNode chamber, safely secreted within the Dantooine ruins—the lure I engineered for my old friend Mace saw to that. And, of course, there is that corniculate half-bot I revived for the paltry fee of a double-necked, eight-string quetarra and one more quaint nom de guerre.

My Oskans, though droll, have been but a distraction; my orbital mines, cloaked with primitive N’Gai technology, merely a means to an end. It is to first causes that we must always remain sensitive: my Jedi stalkers were doomed the instant they accepted their mandate.

Now, here on Marat V, I personally await that son of prophecy, “the Skywalker.”

The Dark Lord is not infallible. Abetted by the eyes of my allies—dead, red, dark, and tripled—I have deciphered the man’s darkest secret. I *know* who he is. The Sith is likely the most cunning man I have ever known, be my life howsoever abbreviate. But still ... just a man.

I am something else.

My promise to bring bacteriological massacre to the Republic’s worlds is no idle threat. I am, in the final analysis, a monster of my word.

Should the Dark Lord fail to keep his, I shall undo him.

Inch by inch.

Molecule by delectable molecule.

I am a butcher. A barbarian. And a madman.

I am not Zeta Magnus.

I am an experiment.

III

PRIME MOVER

Chapter Fifteen

The heavens hemorrhage civil war.

In the evening skies of mountainous Marat V, blaster cannons rip through clouds of S'kytri as Aragh, loyal retainer to the dead patriarch, joins his winged kith and kin in extirpating one another. On one side skirr hulking and deformed ruby and tangerine Outlanders, once a disparaged caste of farmers and sacrilegious “walkers” and now mindless gargoyles defending their recombinant Magister. Assailing them are the azure and jade-skinned “Windborn” of the Highland and Lowland clans—setting aside their differences long enough to slay the indentured race of brothers and sisters they’ve ever held in common contempt.

Even by most standards, the fates are particularly cruel tonight. Exceptional as S'kytri eyesight is by day, tracking leaping kristermet and soaring skingles over a kilometer distant, it is next to useless by moonlight. But here, besieging the tallest summit on Skye, the fog-shrouded mountains now make a *total* mockery of visual acuity. The volar soldiers shed blood like wild animals in the blind pitch, strangling and emboweling, claws slashing and swords clashing, spears and raking blaster fire shredding airborne bodies to pieces. Each flying army mutilates with incurable resolve: one dynamized by the perfect certainty they were born lords of the heavens, the other by the pathological desolation of all self-awareness—save that scalding intuition of the abased for retribution.

They prey one upon the other as dueling eagles, forgetting loved ones, fears and themselves in the immortal lust of the killing instinct for one necessary night of abject ecstasy. Consigned to oblivion, the slain plunge in soundless majesty—consumed in that sublime totality of the everdark below.

Chapter Sixteen

As the din of self-destruction stormed above, its offspring—hot, red and generous—rained down upon a trio of Jedi and a squad of commandos scaling a vertiginous mountain.

“You think the Great Tyrant will let us rest a minute once we get up top?”

“Don’t worry, Hal. When I get my own mountain retreat ... you can make yourself at home.”

“You’ll need to become a tyrant first.”

“You’re *still* invited.... How are those painkillers?”

“The best that taxation of trade routes can buy.”

The going wasn't easy. Zeta Magnus' fortress sat imperiously atop Skye's apex, Canaitith Mountain. There may have been mountains in the galaxy more splendid or treacherous, Anakin speculated, even mountains more sorrowful ... but none could compete with Canaitith for sheer humbling height. From this altitude, the hypnotic curvature of the world laid itself bare.

With Lord Klarymère dead and Kharys spiriting his body to safety, the Jedi and clones were left to their own wingless devices in conquering the peak. Thankfully, however, good old-fashioned muscle, grappling spike launchers, and a few timed, Force-assisted leaps went a very long way. It also helped that the mountain fog obscured them from Magnus' minions ... not-accidentally clinging to their vicinity like pollen to nerf-wool.

The Force, Anakin mused, indeed helped overcome certain limitations.

"Besides," Halagad continued, his head wrapped in gauze. "*You're* the one I'm worried about. I got plenty of practice climbing bluffs back on Alderaan."

"Then why," Anakin paused, "... do you sound ... so winded?"

The planet's perpetually temperate climate helped keep its sky-scraping mountain caps free from snow. But despite its atmosphere being denser in oxygen than average, the air this high up was inevitably thinner. Anakin felt his lungs and muscles burning with exhaustion as they climbed in fluctuating two-man teams—clone, Jedi, clone, Jedi—alternating between one and three bodies sharing a precarious ledge at any one time. The commandos' Republic-issued painkillers and roborants had fast become their crutches of choice.

“Sirs,” inquired the clone beside them. Xoni, maybe. “Why don’t Jedi just fly?”

“That’s ... harder than it looks,” Halagad said, cutting his eyes toward Anakin. “Unless you’ve got a battle droid’s STAP handy.”

Anakin squinted into the night, aiming his next grappling shot carefully. “Trust me, Xoni—”

“Kupe,” Kupe corrected.

“Levitation isn’t like dusting crops, Kupe.”

“Roger that, sir.”

In theory, outright, if limited, telekinetic levitation wasn’t out of the question—just awesomely debilitating. If the Entyrmion’s blood drinkers were any indication, the Jedi needed to conserve every gram of strength for the fortress’ defenses and capturing the genetics terrorist alive.

Alive. Master Windu’s orders had been clear: Supreme Chancellor Palpatine wanted Magnus arrested so to stand trial for his wanton acts. But even with three Jedi and four Republic commandos, there was reason for concern. By all accounts, Magnus was diabolical. If he truly was responsible for such atrocities as the recent stone mite epidemic and *Katana* fleet hive-virus, he was a force to be reckoned with. Anakin could only imagine what terrors the Magister would have guarding him within his aerie sanctuary. And then there was the bantha in the room, too.

With his last gasp, Lord Klarymère had pleaded that Magnus must die ... and Anakin had never taken such dying words lightly. Nor had Obi-Wan ... or Anakin would never have learned the ways of the Force, never have seen all the stars in the galaxy—*Almost all of them.* Never have made Padmé his and only his.

...Never have left Mom to die on Tatooine.

His grappling spike struck its mark. Anakin wrapped his hand around the device and huffed—in relief or fatigue, but probably both.

“I almost *wish* we’d get attacked by STAPs,” he said.

Suddenly, a screech pierced the air. But it was no battle droid-bearing machines that came skirling like furies through the fog.

A trio of ghoulishly misshapen Outlanders, two maroon females and a pasty-orange male, fell on them like dive-bombing hawk-bats.

Taloned feet clawed at Anakin and Halagad’s exposed faces as the creatures’ huge, genetically reinforced wings pounded them into the rocks and precipitously off balance. The Padawans flailed one-handed at the mutant onslaught, shielding their eyes with hooked forearms. But the fully armored Kupe sprung into action. The commando fired a concentrated blizzard of rounds at one of the pestilential harpies, punching it full of holes. Halagad, mostly armored, then seized his chance, *lunging* at the perforated humanoid with a giant, invisible hand. It flailed like a wild beek-monkey within the Jedi’s intangible hold before Halagad bludgeoned the beast conclusively into the mountain crags.

Not to be outdone, Anakin clasped a reddish limb in his skeletal, prosthetic grip and unpityingly *squeezed*, crushing the wailing Outlander’s lower leg to a pulp even as he yanked the mutant to ground. Kupe didn’t waste the opportunity. The clone ripped off a balloon of fire, shrouding the malformed zombie in a blazing cocoon. It thudded aflame onto the ledge alongside its would-be victims, thrashing violently just before Kupe’s boot launched it like an expiring matchstick into the abyss.

Simultaneously, however, the third heinous flyer penetrated Anakin's defenses. He felt the red-hot slash of talons and his mind became pure, searing focus. His right arm shot outward with the Force, and the shrieking ruby female fell unnaturally mute. Hands at its throat, the S'kytri's claws drew blood, as if desperately trying to slit air holes in its own neck. Panicking, wings flapping madly, it backed away.

Anakin's lightsaber came alive in his other hand. Holding the green blade like a lance, he reeled in the offending creature. Compelled by a power it couldn't understand, the mutant struggled wildly, helplessly—silently—as it *slowly* spitted itself, belly first, on Anakin's hot, impaling plasma ... cooking centimeter by excruciating centimeter inside out.

And when its body reached the hilt, Anakin finally released his hold on the Force ... ceding to gravity the gruesome denouement.

Deactivating his lightsaber, Anakin placed his hands on both knees, panting.

"*For chaos' sake, Ani,*" Halagad said accusingly. "What the hell was *that* ab—"

"I'm *alright,*" Anakin explained. "Well ... well done, Kupe."

"Easier than dusting crops, sir."

Before Anakin could say anything, Halagad's comlink pinged.

"Commander Ventor," he acknowledged.

"*Padawan, is everyone alright up there?*" the comlink shouted back.

"Everything's ... under control, Master." Halagad looked at the bisected Outlander, then at Anakin. "We're all fine here, now."

"*Let's try to be a little quieter next time. Kenobi out.*"

Anakin expected some smart remark as Halagad closed the link. But instead, his fellow Padawan just stared intently at his face.

“What?” Anakin said.

With a gloved finger, Halagad slowly traced an imaginary line from his own forehead through the corner of his left eye and down his cheek. Anakin’s brow furrowed, and suddenly he felt a sharp pain alongside his right eye. Mirroring Halagad’s gesture on his own face, he winced. When he withdrew his hand, a red smear coated his gold fingertip.

“That’s a nice one,” Halagad said.

“Maybe some armor isn’t such a bad idea,” Anakin admitted.

“*Bacta’s* what we need right now.”

“Maybe we can ask Magnus nicely.”

“Don’t worry if it scars, Rimmer. The fems love that. Plus, it makes for a good bull’s-eye.”

“Makes me twice as glad Ventress isn’t around, then,” Anakin said. “But maybe you’re right. You think an Alderaanian royal and a Jedi like me—”

“Watch it, Skywalker.”

“If you’re finished, commanders,” Kupe said, “we should get on.”

The clamor of combat grew. Automated laser projectors shrilled fire into the clouds of chaos above and S’kytri battle cries carried on the wind, as the Republic party at last reached the stronghold.

Less than an hour remained to Magnus’ genocidal deadline.

The Magister’s fortress-keep was an architectural spectacle. Constructed entirely from gypryst by Magnus’ zombified sycophants, the mishmash fortification seemed to

epitomize the deranged soul of its landlord. Two cruelly aristocratic Serennese towers, equivalent in stature, buttressed a primary rectangular section—creating the appearance of a mathematical cross worthy of worship by Givin. A third tower, half again as tall, rose from the center between the other two, emulating an irreverent finger gesture uniquely Korunnai.

Colossally impractical windows, in the modern Onderonian style, graced the structure's every side. The greatest of these gaudy offenders ornamented the front and back of the middle section in the unmistakable shape of a double-ended dagger, stabbing in opposite directions through each face's length. Atop each tower, organic-looking minarets like Geonosian hive spires needled skyward, and the telltale streaks of S'kytri bloodstone crawled the castle surface like unhealing lacerations. The stronghold's foundation finally blended seamlessly into the mountain rock itself, as if all of Canaitith would soon be a sculpture in homage to the Great Tyrant.

The champagne-colored fortress appeared to be without a principal façade, and without it, any obvious access, save the central terrace or balconies circumscribing the minarets—over which biologically altered Outlanders swarmed like irate Nevoota vespids.

Thankfully, most of the defensive laser batteries clustered around these areas. After all, an invasion from below was almost unthinkable. Carefully, so as not to alarm their proximity sensors, Anakin fired his spike launcher into a protruding ledge. It sunk in with a satisfying *shunk* and, when the batteries didn't react, he reeled himself a third of the way up the fortress wall. Next, he signaled, watching as surgical

strikes from below systematically blew out the laser projectors around him. Only Republic clone troopers were so precise.

Though the citadel's numerous windows made for tempting targets, the crackle of energy gave away their protective ray shielding. But Jedi Knights were well versed in surgical arts. Hooking the grappling line to his belt winch, Anakin lit his lightsaber and lanced it into the fortification. The blade then carved a meter-and-a-half ring with the strictness of a laser scalpel—a virtue, admittedly, more of the wall's obscene thickness than a Padawan's patience.

Anakin had hardly concluded his handy work before he impatiently slammed his metal palm into the nascent wall plug with supernatural force. But instead of popping like a cork, the slab merely lurched halfway, grinding horribly and sending a groaning shudder through the fortress.

“Other way, Chosen One,” his comlink opined.

“Eat chuba, Nerfherder.”

“That wasn't me,” a younger voice said.

The Chosen One winced. *“Right. Sorry, Master.”*

Gripping the grappling line tight, Anakin kicked himself away from the wall. Once. Twice ... the

Force massing kinetically in his lower limbs. And as he swung back, his feet *cracked*, imploding the slab into the citadel.

Anakin tumbled in after it, rolling into a lightsaber-ready stance, primed to take on Outlander sentinels and whatever other abominations Magnus had patrolling. His blade cast everything in the room an angry green.

But that was just it.

There was nothing *in* the room.

Just Anakin. Four walls ... and his overqualified candlestick. But in marked contrast to the outer façade, the interior was coated in cold, reflective chrome.

“One hundred percent,” he said into his comlink at last. Standard clone trooper lingo for *all clear*.

Nilo, sporting his distinctive shoulder pauldron, was first to follow through the portal. But if the commando captain cared for, or even understood, Anakin’s assessment, he didn’t show it. Ever professional, he entered the dark room, helmet lights searching, DC-17m at the ready.

“I said it’s safe,” Anakin said.

The lights of Nilo’s spot-lumas froze on Anakin, as if something had temporarily perplexed the clone.

“*Two* hundred percent is better, Commander,” Nilo finally said. “Tarks. Proceed with caution.”

The remaining commandos followed Obi-Wan and Halagad in, while Anakin and Nilo remained vigilant. With all inside, two clones reconnoitered the adjoining hallway before giving the signal for Anakin to resume point.

Like the room they’d breached, the hallway was completely barren. Not a single gilded tapestry or self-idolizing statue typical of megalomaniacs the galaxy over. A number of simple slab-carved doors lined the hall, itself covered in that same speculum layering, the Jedi and clones’ warped images bouncing back from every angle.

“Ultrachrome,” Obi-Wan said. “Supercon-ducting. Blaster resistant.”

“Lightsaber resistant?” Halagad asked.

“To a point.”

Anakin pushed on one of the bloodstone doors. It pivoted open without so much as a whisper. Peering in, he found no jewel-encrusted throne with obligatory Sith Lord

reposing evilly upon it. Instead, the chamber was equally empty. Almost as if never used.

Sterile, he thought.

Something was niggling at Anakin's mind. A pressure he couldn't quite put his metal finger on. "Something's not right here."

And as Anakin exited the room, he saw it.

At the far end of the corridor stood a royal blue T-series tactical warbot. Sized like a super battle droid, the Separatist battlefield coordinator looked as if the mid-section of its body had been irreversibly gutted. This detracted little, however, from the intimidating compliment achieved between the jut of its barreled torso and its progressively swollen appendages, arms and legs fattening into faux-musculature ending at robotic ankles and wrists.

Even without yet hearing its vocoder lisp those characteristically heartless stereophonic tonalities, Anakin needed only one look at the sinister features of the T-series' face within that squashed-box of a head to recall the dangerous foe the notoriously clever automatons represented.

Of course, all that went out the thermal exhaust port as the droid let out a prissy little squeal of surprise.

"*Oh!*" The warbot exclaimed.

"You!" Anakin said. "Stop!"

But the droid had already scurried around the corner out of sight.

A commando gave chase, over-sized rifle in hand. He skidded to a halt when he reached the spot the droid had occupied. "Better have a look at this, sirs!"

The Jedi and remaining Tarks quickly joined him.

And there it was. A simple, but imposing, jewel-encrusted double doorway, gilded in dazzling aurodium. It might as well have been the arrow marking a treasure holomap.

Anakin shouldered past the clone. "Good work, Kupe."

"Xoni, sir."

Anakin nodded at his fellow Jedi. "Throne room."

"It's a trap," Obi-Wan said.

"I know *that*."

"On three, then."

"In Galactic Standard or Thyrsian?" Halagad said, kissing his medallion.

"Allow me, sir," Nilo said, counting off fingers: "Xoni. Quo. *Kupe*."

Again, Anakin's prosthetic palm lashed out with crushing telekinetic muscle, and this time the stone slabs did not dare withstand. The doors exploded inward, and the Jedi Knights barreled in with lightsabers ablaze.

There was a high-pitched whine, a turquoise explosion, something smothering.

"Chuba!" Anakin yelled.

Then all was darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

A maelstrom of carnage whirled about Aragh.

Lasers screamed all around, lighting up the night like pyroworks, as the leader of the Windborn army dove through the aerial battlefield. Barreling into a somersault, the claws of the S'kytri Highlander's foot found their soft target, shredding the abdomen of an orange Outlander like jerba cheese. Just as he rolled upright, Aragh's arms then shot fatally forward, lancing his golden-tipped spear through the enemy's grotesque face, shattering jawbone and puncturing skull. Finally, with a might born of madness, the highborn warrior whipped the skewered mutant in an arc overhead, flinging the corpse into the black.

The siege had been raging for hours, and Aragh knew his wearied forces couldn't last much longer. Exhausted himself—from battle, from his wounds, from the secret knowledge his beloved patriarch was dead—the retainer partly only wished he could carry long enough to witness Marat Prime hurl her fecund rays one last time, dispelling the blind night—Daughter Spawn of the Entyrmion.

<Wing Commander!>

Aragh whirled, his bloody spear poised, as the flame-haired Lowlander Herana streaked toward him.

<Proclaim!> He ordered.

<Retainer, the Jedi walkers have infiltrated the tyrant's palace!> She said.

For a moment, the howls of pandemonium subsided ... and the retainer all but breathed relief. The dawn wind, sweet and cool, filled Aragh's wings and lungs with the unique hallowedness of ... hope.

But the respite was all too brief.

Without warning, an immense laser blast flashed beside him—missing his Windborn sister by the merest of centimeters.

<Herana!> He yelled. Yet it wasn't the anti-air cannonade that concerned him ... but the murderous, red blur exposed by its light. <*Behind—!*>

But it was no use. Aragh could just make out the silhouettes as the deranged Outlander bent back Herana's head and smashed down with slathering fangs, ripping out her throat with a lecherous squish like a wet kiss.

A shadow plummeted in the dark ... and the hope in Aragh's bosom died with it.

Loosing a fell snarl, one-part war cry one-part mourning, the retainer torpedoed his blue body at the ruby abomination.

The motion sent them both screaming end over end, like rainbow comets ... back into the life-stealing maelstrom of anonymity.

Chapter Eighteen

Halagad ... was dreaming.

It wasn't long after Okonomo. Not long after Tia—and overstaying his welcome at House Organa. Halagad was seeking a Jedi Master. The blind Miralukan Jerec, the librarian Ashka Boda, the maverick Djinn Altis—all rejected him. Halagad was too old, they said, too reckless, too attached—too *obsessed* with becoming a Jedi.

But Prestor never gave up on him. Now as *Senator* Organa, he met with his supporter Everen Ettene, one of those Jedi among Master C'baoth's Alderaan delegation ... all those years ago. Ettene saw in Halagad something of

herself, savoring the challenge of bringing him to heel. She trained him. Castigated him. Nurtured him.

She loved me ... like a mother.

He could repress the memory no longer.

He remembered his father Ean, his mother Zollet ... so excited as they said goodbye. The Organas were sending them as their trusted representatives for the largest annual gathering of Alderaanian aristocrats, intellectuals, scientists, and moneyed philanthropists to the luxurious retreat on the island paradise of Okonomo.

His mother, tall, just like him, slender and auburn haired. The strict disciplinarian. But right now ... giddy as a schoolgirl.

His father, stocky, just like him, blond and short-waisted. His smoky eyes always smiling. But right now ... somehow sad.

"I guess we're off to the bloodwolves, son."

"More like a Millinar paradise," Halagad says. "Just don't forget to hawk some worthy causes."

"Bag us a manka cat while you're with Tia," he says, winking. "Your mom likes magenta."

"If you get hurt..." she warns. "I'll take it out of that spoiled girl's hide."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll see about making sure her petticoat isn't in the way."

"On second thought, buster, you'd better pray those mankas get you before I do."

"You're going to be late for your cloud car," he tells them. "I'll see you when you get back."

Halagad did take down a manka on that hunting trip. And that evening with Tia, enjoying the blissful warmth of the incinerator hearth, Prestor approached them ... unable to hide the devastation burdening his soulful eyes.

"My boy," he sobbed. "By Pitiless Molator. There's been a transmission...."

“Awaken.”

Halagad, far, far away from consciousness, felt the command tickle his ear like a lover’s susurraton. And where Anakin would have thought of a queen and Obi-Wan a duchess, Halagad thought of ...

... his son.

“Please,” the command came again. “Please awaken, vermin.”

Halagad *was* awake. But he felt his body paralyzed in that return to awareness from the deepest of sleeps. He felt panic seize him until an instinctive eternity passed.

That’s when he opened his eyes at last ... and registered a reality of cold dread.

The thing staring into his face was not alive. Of course, classifications for galactic life being what they are, that counted for little. Nor did it matter whether or not the thing’s intentions were categorically malicious. What mattered was that the droid sitting menacingly on Halagad’s skull, locking it in place, was reading him with unblinking red photoreceptors and coursing yellow arcs of excruciating electric energy over his face.

Meanwhile, the royal blue tactical droid that had baited them was holding Anakin’s thrumming blue lightsaber to Halagad’s throat.

He felt completely disoriented. He felt like he weighed a ton.

In point of fact, he practically did.

“Man-trap,” Obi-Wan grunted.

Man-trap.

Like torture droids, there was nothing *intrinsically* evil about a man-trap. Just brute, irrefutable physics. Still, any device capable of completely immobilizing Jedi demanded a

modicum of respect. Set up in minutes, the thin devices amplified a planet's given gravity by a factor of eight over their metallic surfaces. Frequently deployed by bounty hunters, the clever contraptions pinned unsuspecting targets flat as their bodies became their own worst enemies.

Such apparatus couldn't generally subdue Force-users indefinitely. Then again, it wasn't generally feasible to get the jump on a group of Jedi at all. Whatever the droid hunkered over Halagad was doing, though, it was painfully effective and completely disrupting his connection with the Living Force.

"That Ithorian diet ... sounds good ... right now," Anakin said.

"You and me ... both," Halagad replied.

"There shall be no final meal requests," a voice like rust rumbled. "Only executions."

The voice, monstrously bass, didn't belong to the tactical droid. With fuzzy vision, Halagad's eyeballs tracked round the chamber. They were no longer in the throne room. What appeared to be bioscanners and medical capsules, and a pungent antiseptic stench, suggested they were in a laboratory. Yet, the quarters managed to mimic a dungeon with superb success. Contrary to the starkness elsewhere in the fortress, here sinister red, green and black chemical soups filled racks of ionic vials, crystalplex test tubes and burettes, and Carosite beakers blanketing medical tables wall to ultrachrome-coated wall. Alongside them nestled collections of small cryotanks swimming with brains, hearts, lungs and other revoltingly unrecognizable viscera. Just as unsettling was the variety of totally transparent canisters harboring invisible microorganic ills.

A deactivated lightsaber—Obi-Wan's—appeared magnetized to a silver notch at the tactical droid's hip. The

automaton's posture appeared more severe now, proud almost. Halagad could now see that *both* its arms were stretched dramatically to its sides, the other appendage holding his green lightsaber to the neck of Anakin's prone body, too.

"A career in holothatre's ... not too late, circuit-brain," Halagad said.

But as if on cue, the T-series droid winked the lightsabers suddenly out of existence, and retreated to a nearby surgical trestle covered in stock operating instruments that took on a unique malevolence by virtue of their very visibility: vibroscalpels, nervesplicers, hypo-syringes. It was only as Halagad's eyes floated over less elegant cutting utensils, like laser saws, fusioncutters, ryyk blades, and a ludicrously large Kashoonara-styled halberd that he felt his stomach churn.

It was the halberd that the droid showed interest in. Exchanging Halagad and Anakin's lightsabers for the weapon, the tactical droid hefted the gigantic vibro-axe and held it like a tightrope walker's oversized balancing pole.

And beside the surgical trestle, lining the walls like a collection of Nautolan hydrosculpts, were numerous bacta tanks. Only the creatures inside the bubbling cylinders weren't being healed.

They were being born.

Bobbing inside a third of these incubators were maturing blood eaters, gulping occasionally at the rich red nectar buoying them. The dwellers of the remaining tanks in view consisted of monstrosly deformed S'kytri Outlanders, bobbing in a green serum—their faces contorted in unspeakable pain.

And standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the nutrient vats were Nilo and the Tarks.

Like the tactical warbot, the identical Katarn-armored clones stood proud and straight-backed, all holding their T-visor helmets in the crook of their left arms. They remained undistinguishable, but for Nilo's identifying pauldron and the queer blasters two of them had traded for their DC-17ms.

But, as with the blood eaters, it was the clones' *faces* that were most surprising. For they were not the familiar, dark features of Jango Fett. Not even close. Their collective visage was white as ash, and the hair on their heads a complimentary shock of silver. Their noses projected sharp from their narrow faces, and encircling their heads were bands winking with electronics.

"Good morning, Commanders," Nilo said. "Are those stun blasts finally wearing off?"

The clone captain patted his rifle warmly, his Thyrsian accent coming through crisp, unfiltered by a helmet.

"Release us, Captain," Obi-Wan said. "That's an order."

"Don't fret, General. I promise your release, when it comes, will be especially sweet."

The truth slowly dawned on Halagad.

Fools. They'd been fools.

Nilo, Xoni, Quo, and Kupe were not just Thyrsian-*trained* commandos. No. The clones were honest-to-gods *Thyrsians*.

Sun Guard mercenaries.

"How could you ... betray the Republic?"

"I think that should be obvious," Nilo said, his men donning their helmets as he acknowledged each. "As simply as 'One,' 'Two,' 'Three.'"

"Go bork yourself," Anakin said.

And that's when that terrible disembodied bass returned.

"Don't be overly embarrassed with yourselves, sorcerers," it consoled. "In war, little good follows from getting to know

the blaster fodder. After all, once you've seen one clone, you've seen them all."

The tactical droid now whirred into motion, carrying the behemoth vibro-axe, and it took all of Halagad's strength just to shift the fractional centimeters necessary to track its forward ambulation.

Then the man, if he could be called that, stepped into Halagad's view, claiming the frighteningly proportionate weapon handily as the robotic soldier knelt before its master.

Anx, Wookiees, Hutts—Halagad had encountered large sentient beings before. But as his eyes and pummeled mind tried to take in this dewback-sized humanoid, he couldn't help feeling primitive awe.

Vermilion robes cascaded in imperious layers down a massive, three-and-a-half-meter frame that nearly scraped the ceiling. The being's upper torso was covered in meticulous ceremonial armor, its pieces interlocking like a Nimbanese puzzleflower. The protective covering climbed up its chest to a pair of shingled pauldrons and into an ionic chainmail mesh that obscured its face and neck as if a beard of steel. Completing the panoply was a silver helmet with spike protrusions extending with almost mathematical wickedness at ninety-degree angles from either side of his head, an inverted crescent running like a mane from helmet front to back. And finally, the Kashoonara halberd, as long as its handler was tall, reached like a preposterous walking stick from his skullcap to the floor.

And the only thing visible, within all those tiers and tiers of mass, were two utterly bewitching, golden eyes—glowing with sinister sagacity.

Zeta Magnus. If he wasn't a Sith Lord, he damn well looked the part.

"The Tarks' *painkillers*..." Halagad recalled suddenly. "We took them ... all the way up."

"Your ego would welcome such a convenient salve. But no, learner: your judgment was not clouded by those vitalizing roborants," Magnus said. "For your predicament, blame nothing more than your inherent clonal prejudices and natural stupidity. Excuses are unbecoming warriors."

"Clone cyborgs," Anakin uttered. "Slight ... overkill."

"Overconfidence is the privilege of sorcerers, not scientists," Magnus retorted. "The cybernetic control bands make my Thyrsian drone warriors as obediently remorseless—and unreadable—as droids while retaining the ingenuities of living combatants. Without malice or intention save my will, they are the perfect soldiers."

He turned to the drones, and Nilo's pallid chin dipped dutifully.

"Perfect *slaves*," Anakin spat.

The cloner guffawed, a sound like a bantha being run through a trash compactor. "As opposed to the *imperfect* slaves of your Grand Army? Your judgment merits as much respect as your feeble powers of reason, young Skywalker."

In the distance, the cry of dying S'kytri persisted.

"Your mutants," Obi-Wan intoned, "are animals. Not soldiers."

"A technicality. Expediency remains, whenever possible, a scientific maxim. And terror enjoys its own rational paradigm."

"Oh, *perfectly* rational," Anakin said. "If you're an ... insane, overgrown Jawa."

“Explain then, Magister,” Obi-Wan pressed, his strained voice rhythmic. “What is it ... you want?”

Halagad felt a fragile ripple through the Force. He tried to concentrate, adding his own sluggish signature to Obi-Wan’s strength, and recognizing Anakin’s faint awareness there as well.

The Great Tyrant paused ... though whether lost in thought or Force affliction, Halagad couldn’t tell.

“Bygone,” Magnus said, “are the days when my bloodlust obeyed any will other than my own. But rules, some rules, have exceptions. I have bargained your death, wizard, and that of your learner Ventor, so that young Skywalker’s talents might properly flourish under my benefactor’s guidance.”

“And who is ... your benefactor?” Obi-Wan’s inflection was now hypnotic. “Dooku?”

Magnus again hesitated, and this time his glowing eyes flickered. He raised a cudgel-like forefinger. Obi-Wan cried out as amplified arcs of electricity from the torture droid shot through his brain. Though the three drones beside their captain remained immovably stoic, Nilo sneered at the general.

“Jedi fool,” Magnus said. “I have tamed devils far greater than you. Though the answer you seek is petty, I deny it to you ... for I am annulling the terms of my original agreement.”

“And ... why ... is that?”

“Recall the dying burble of Asenec of Crakull: ‘Tyrants, however small, truckle to no one.’ Instead, I shall slay you one and all, Skywalker included, replacing you with cybernetically enhanced drones grown from your own tissues and implanted with facsimiles of your own memories. That is the corresponding task of the mindscan droids perched upon

your craniums. And they are nearly finished. For my inconvenience, I shall obtain three fully trained Jedi slaves, and a confidant to the Supreme Chancellor, no less. And *none* shall be the wiser.”

“That’s impossible,” Anakin managed. “*No one* grows clones that fast.”

“You are in error. While some cloning methods require a gestation of as many as sixty weeks to produce a mere fetus, my expertise in genetic replication standards, even the Jedis’ own abandoned techniques, allow me to generate a fully viable drone within days.”

“*Days?*” Halagad blurted.

“Hours, actually, when necessary. Though such an abridged incubation predictably results in the final product’s distinct instability, both mental and, inevitably, physical.”

Halagad could not tell if he was lying or just unconditionally insane, but to his credit, Magnus appeared deathly serious.

Then the Magister nodded to his Thyrsian drones, and Tark Squad respectfully parted rank....

Revealing three incubation vats. One of these was notably empty, like a translucent coffin awaiting a cadaver. But within the two adjacent tanks, floating peacefully side-by-side, were two boys ... not older than ten standard years. With their mutually gentle faces, they might even have been brothers.

Except they weren’t.

“It *can’t be...*” Anakin said.

Because those boys’ faces ... were Anakin’s and Obi-Wan’s. Halagad couldn’t see his fellow Jedis’ reactions—but he *felt* them, their minds blasting emotion like searing acid through the Force. Anakin, a boiling cauldron of confusion, a

caged animal radiating horror, anger, revulsion, and ... sadness.

But *Obi-Wan*...

The keenly steady general had entered a state of being all together foreign—and truly terrifying. Like a domesticated narglatch turned feral without warning. Like a brood-father having just witnessed the brutal murder of his only progeny. Like someone who had *everything* to lose ... but no longer cared one gods-forsaken whit.

Like a man realizing he was the only one playing by rules in a game that had none.

At last, there was *nothing* like a Jedi Master convinced of rights to blood.

“*Cloner*,” Obi-Wan breathed. “I promise ... you will live to *rue* this day.”

“No, wizard,” Magnus said. “I won’t. I am, as they say, such a one as was not made for repenting.” The cyber-geneticist motioned toward the newly revealed clones. “Currently, these youngling specimens are nothing more than mindless meat. But learner Ventor’s genetic spawn will join them promptly, at which point cyber-mnemonic implantations shall commence.”

“You psychotic extremists,” Anakin said. “Always ... playing god.”

“I am no deity, Skywalker. I am a magistrate of natural law. True, flash-pumping a subject’s memories, particularly an unwilling one, isn’t easy. But I have improved markedly upon the psycho-probing procedure, and it is far from a god-like task, I swear to you. Though far from my Alderaan and hive virus masterpieces, this simple operation shall serve my ends just the same.”

And at those words, a glacial shiver prickled through Halagad. The hungry hole in his heart yawned, and the gravity pressure on his chest seemed to multiply tenfold....

“A-Alderaan?” he repeated.

Magnus tilted his head ever slightly, as if truly seeing the Padawan for the first time. “Indeed ... Alderaanian. You’re no doubt acquainted with that pleasingly barbaric incident—”

...The pain in Halagad’s chest began throbbing.
Gnawing....

“—transpiring there not ten years ago, the so-called Okonomo Tragedy—”

Gnawing....

“—in which a gaggle of self-absorbed nobles, robber barons, and scientists—”

Savoring....

“—including one Arkanian matron, the very last of my reprobate creators—”

Swallowing....

“—were driven unremittingly mad by a pernicious hive virus—”

Swallowing....

“—and eagerly devoured each other’s flesh and organs like starving slime dogs?”

Gone.

A low, inhuman moan rose softly into the air.

And even before the sound deepened into a growl....

Even before it crested into a feral, animal scream....

The hungry hole in Halagad’s heart ripped open forever.

And devoured itself.

The torture droid restraining him responded accordingly, scrambling his brains with relentless shocks until finally frying the screaming Jedi into submission.

“Admittedly,” the cloner continued, “that banquet was shamefully meager in scope. But as both host and partaker, I can personally attest my pampered guests atoned for this vulgarity with the exceptional immodesty of their appetites and the ... *succulent* flavor of their humors.”

The T-series droid *kiklik-klicked* an electronic snigger.

Halagad’s eyes closed ... spilling long rivulets down the sides of his face.

“*Monster.*” He whispered.

“Alas.” Hefting his enormous scimitar staff, Magnus slapped the long handle into his opposite massive mitt. “But rest assured, boy, I still have a heart. I’ll not deny you the same privilege I granted those vermin at Okonomo.”

The colossus heaved the behemoth weapon back and high overhead. Catching a ray from the dawning sun, the axe glinted with a coquettish gleam.

“After all—” Magnus concluded. “Alderaanians are delicious.”

And with all the force of his gargantuan bulk, the cloner’s scimitar came screaming down on Halagad’s chest.

And the scimitar connected—ripping into its victim like a butcher’s knife through raw meat—body convulsing uncontrollably—gushing the stuff of life—chunks flying from the gaping cavity—shredded entrails lying exposed in the grievous wound, dark, seeping vitality puddling on the floor.

Halagad ... opened his eyes.

For an instant—or eternity—sweet conscious-ness vanished. A mind conquered by intolerable shock shutdown, the natural world fell away, and the familiar here-and-now surrendered to un-disputed darkness.

Then, just as suddenly, the dead man felt the damp fog of unreality dissolve ... replaced with the soft, luminous awareness that dawns in becoming one with the Force.

And it was within this oneness with the energy that surrounds and penetrates all living things ... that the dead man realized he wasn't dead at all. At that instant, Halagad saw Zeta Magnus' axe, directly over his head ... cloven clean through the maimed and glitching droid that had been torturing his mind and obstructing his connection to the Force.

Free from the pulverizing psycho-probe, Halagad met the Magister's golden, inscrutable eyes, suspended just centimeters from his own, as they radiated the subtlest hint of utter stupefaction.

Not excoriating Halagad had definitely *not* been the Great Tyrant's plan.

Suddenly, two shots pulsed from one of the Thyrsian commandos' rifles, scorching through the negligible space separating tyrant from Padawan. The blaster bolts smashed into the mindscanner hovering over Obi-Wan's head, and the automaton died in a squealing detonation.

Even through his helmet, the commando guilty of firing looked stunned. Then Nilo unraveled the riddle.

"Blast her!"

Halagad had only a second to look, spotting a green flutter against the reddening sky just outside the laboratory window. It was Kharys—her eyes partially closed and her up-turned hands extended as if clutching a weapon only she could see.

Chaos. The Thyrsian drones unleashed a torrent of blaster fire at the S'kytri girl ... only to have the majority ricochet off the window's protective ray shielding. But the

blue battle droid whirled into action. A component on its forearm flared, pumping off a mini-concussion missile.

“Kharys!” Anakin yelled.

The deadly projectile penetrated the ray shield. The girl’s eyes went wide, and her open hands crossed reflexively in front of her ... just as the miniature rocket blew.

Kharys screamed, entirely disappearing as the blast-cloud engulfed her.

The next instant, her blackened arms and wings were folding up as her freefalling form plummeted toward the unforgiving, serrated terrain below.

Straight away, the drones redirected for a shot at Obi-Wan, spitting blaster fire from their rifles. Equally swiftly, their battle droid accomplice quick-drew the Jedi general’s lightsaber, magnetized at its hip. But Obi-Wan was faster. Still moored to the man-trap, he flipped himself, medbed and all, away from the shrilling energy bolts. And as he extended his hand, the tactical droid’s arm was nearly wrenched out of its socket as the lightsaber ripped from its grip. Obi-Wan flipped the power switch, and the blade sliced through the man-trap matrix anchoring down Anakin before nestling solidly into the general’s grasp.

Halagad’s confusion evaporated. Raw, scarlet emotion rushed to fill the void. He howled. An invisible boulder of incoherent fury plowed into Zeta Magnus’ chest. There was an awful crunch of fracturing bone as the Magister’s humongous mass smashed into a wall. The cloner retched blue ichor as his vibro-axe clattered to the floor.

Obi-Wan sickled his lightsaber through his own man-trap matrix, killing its hold just as Anakin splattered his torture droid’s positronic brains with his robotic right fist. As the drone commandos fired in retaliation, Anakin immediately

emulated his master, flipping the heavy med unit over with him as a back shield.

Then, in tandem, the lightsabers on the surgical trestle sailed into Anakin and Halagad's waiting hands, the Padawans hardly noting that, even in this bedlam, each had improbably summoned his brother's blade, honoring their sacred oath.

"*Blue-Tark!*" Magnus screamed. And with a speed that belied its stiff appearance, the blue warbot dashed to shield its master like a rearing spider, deadly blasters flexing from every segment of its chassis like mechanical muscles.

Magnus had gathered up his titanic frame with astonishing speed and pointed at the Jedi with his hatchet.

"*Annihilate them!*" He shouted, charging the exit with his automatus bodyguard as the droid covered their escape in a hail of blaster fire.

Deflecting laser bolts, blue blade smoldering, Halagad tore after them.

Chapter Nineteen

“Hall!” Anakin bawled ... just as the Thyrsian drones played their trump card.

Blaster fire arrowed across the room, blowing up the exit control panel. Just as Halagad squeezed past, the ultrachrome-sheathed blast door came hammering closed, sealing everyone else in.

A dread silence prevailed as Anakin and Obi-Wan panted heavily, each behind his respective med unit, neither able to see the other. And Anakin was still struggling to dissipate the fog from his battered mind when ... he realized that it wasn't really silence at all.

His ears were ringing. With a peculiarly ominous whine.

And the Jedi commander realized that Magnus' command to "annihilate" them was no mere turn of phrase.

"*Move!*" Obi-Wan roared.

Automatically, Anakin acted, leaping from his hiding place in the same instant the commandos fired. With a trill and a sickening sizzle, a beam of spastic energy literally ripped through the air.

As it contacted the med unit which had hidden Anakin, said unit *dissolved* in an oddly beautiful yet nauseating iridescence—as chemical bonds broke down in ecstasies of absolute, unequivocal, atomic deletion.

Disruptors. Class-D.

And as Anakin leapt, the commandos were waiting for him. Like the birthing of twin suns, two streams of manic crimson ballooned from waiting gauntlets, crawling over Anakin's exposed body.

"Coming in hot!" Anakin wailed, crash landing beside his master and slapping the fire from his flaming garments.

"We *told* you to wear—"

"*Armor*, I know! Master, Hal and Kharys—"

"Focus, Padawan! On the *here* and *now!*"

"I *know*—" Anakin squeezed his eyelids tight, feeling like he was fighting a migraine. "—but I'm still feeling this ... bizarre *pressure*."

"Our *replacements*." Obi-Wan flicked his head in the direction of their fresh youngling selves. "I think their identical midi-chlorian signatures are interrupting our connections to the Living Force."

"Last chance, Jedi!" came the unfiltered voice of Nilo. "Surrender or suffer trans-nebulization."

"Captain!" Obi-Wan yelled over the med unit. "I thought I told you: no disintegrations!"

“Sorry, General. We’re Thyrsus Sun Guard stock. Save those pathetic orders for your Mandalorian-cloned handmaidens.”

“They *really* don’t like Mandalorians,” Anakin said.

“I can’t say that I blame them,” Obi-Wan said.

“Let me try.” Anakin cleared his throat. “Tark Squad! This is Commander Skywalker! The *Chosen* One. The *Son* of the S—”

“Go bork yourself, wizard!”

Anakin turned to his master. “They really don’t like Jedi, either.”

“Living prophets,” Obi-Wan emended. “*Move!*”

Chapter Twenty

Red.

I hear the blast door hammer closed behind me, my medallion smashing on my breastplate with every footfall. But like a nexu in a dark wood, all I see is red ... as those scarlet robes of the fleeing giant flutter after him.

And the blue of Ani's lightsaber blazing in my hand.

Blaster fire and concussion rockets from Magnus' droid henchman whistle toward me like razor quills shot from a Spinner in heat. But just like a nightmare, or the object of Xenu's paradox, no matter how fast my blade blocks, no matter how fast I run ... I can't catch sight of the monster as he twists through the castle at a dead sprint.

Just those flowing, scarlet robes. Spilling behind him like a trail of blood.

Chancellor Palpatine demands this coward's apprehension, unharmed, to stand trial....

Magnus ... must die.

Master Windu and Lord Klarymére's contradictory commands pour like molten plasma through the sulci of my brain. But they're both telling me only one thing.

This time, Magnus can't get away.

And with that certainty, that crystal clear absolute—the Force is with me.

The molten plasma in my mind seeps down into my core, crossing every invisible conduit in my body, connecting every part of me with every other part of my being like a quantum constellation.

The Force burns through me uncontested, a fuel unlike any other. My legs become mobile fire, engines of immeasurable power as they accelerate through the tortuous passageways, my lightsaber become an impenetrable shield of blinding velocity.

I feel my body unraveling at the cellular level under the blitz of cosmic energies. Even so, I follow the commandment "faster faster." I can't tell whether the whispers are coming from my imagination or the wisdom of midi-chlorians ... or something far more insidious.

But, either or—I could give a damn. The Force is with me.

And Magnus won't get away.

And at last, the Magister's awesome immensity comes full into view, as the monster and his robotic stooge scramble through an irising doorway to a starship hangar. Faintly, I hear the bot's disturbingly stereophonic, feminine vocoder mutter something about the Skyriver Invader not being ready for takeoff. Good.

With a final surge, I leap through the contracting portal. My armor, or my shoulder, crunches as I land hard and awkward, and my lightsaber skids out of my hand. But adrenaline temporarily salves any

pain and, rolling to my feet, I see Magnus and the gutted battle droid scurrying toward a strange, triangular vessel that reminds me of the broken T-11 model I used to play with as a kid.

Grabbing my spike launcher, I zero in and—fire. As the barb slices ten meters through the air, liquid-cable whipping like a windsnake, I hold on with both hands for dear life.

The miniature harpoon hits its mark, drilling into the wall of Magnus' back. With a roar, I jerk the monster to a hard halt, his droid Blue-Tark surging ahead and charging up the starship ramp.

The giant's reflexes are incredible. I can't tell whether Magnus is drawing on the Force or he's naturally just that damn fast. But with astonishing speed, the monster spins his repugnant mass, wrapping his swollen arm around the liquicord and jerking with all his might. I nearly lose my arms as I fly face first into the hangar floor.

For a moment, everything goes black. But the next thing I know, I'm on my feet, and my lightsaber's flaming in my hand.

His veiled face is utterly mysterious. But those golden eyes, burning like stars in deep space, turn into smoldering slits. From somewhere, I find the courage to say it. As the words come out, I can taste the blood pouring from my demolished mouth.

"It's over, you twisted abortion. By order of the Supreme Chancellor, you're under arrest."

Not speaking a word, Magnus rears to his full height—the bastard almost twice my size in every direction. And ever so calmly, he reaches around his back and rips out the spike lodged there, now coated with a deep blue slime. Then, slowly, he removes the chainmail mesh on his face.

As the veil falls away, his features remain impossibly plunged in impenetrable shadow ... but for a revolting ringlet of two-dozen, uneven diamond-like fangs glistening from the pitch of his face, exactly like the jaws of a man-eating dianoga.

Then, like a king feeding on jewel-fruit, he dips the durasteel grappling spike into that maw of death, mulching it into oblivion with a

sound like a podracer crashing. He then grips that scythe of his between two gigantic fists.

"There's ... there's no escape," I tell him. "Don't make me destroy you."

At these words, at last, he speaks.

He laughs and he laughs and he laughs.

It's a vile, soul-destroying sound. A sickening sound, like a wrecker droid chewing a cackle of gutkurrs to bits. A sound like corroded metal choking on decaying meat. A sound of rot and death mixing incomprehensibly with ... joy. It's the sound of a murderer in love with life.

MY BOY, he says through his grotesque orifice, I SHALL GORGE ON YOUR HEART WITH A SIDE OF ARKANIAN DIAMONDS AND A FINE DELTRON SPICE WINE.

I remember my father. I remember him reading my favorite holobook, lulling me into slumber at night with the reassuring sound of his voice:

This is the story of a great warrior. His name is Busteromuchmacho, or Buster for short, and he is the smallest and bravest of all Jedi....

I can't keep the tears from falling down my face. They fry with tiny fizzles on the shaft of my lightsaber blade.

It's only in the dark that we're all alone together....

"Why?" I plead. "Why did you do it?"

The monster takes his time. And I wait an eternity, fearing I may never know the answer I need to hear with every infinitesimal fiber of my being.

But then he speaks, presenting me with the only real, the only reasonable, explanation I could ever hope to hear:

BECAUSE, YOUNG VERMIN, his murdering jaws confess—

I am the Dark you see, and I'll be with you forever....

—***I AM ZETA MAGNUS.***

And he laughs and he laughs and he laughs....

Chapter Twenty-One

“Move!”

Like coiled springs, Obi-Wan and Anakin leapt just as twin beams of scintillating incoherence atomized their medbed cover. And the Tarks, more than ready, sprayed incandescent fire directly into their trajectory.

But this time, Obi-Wan and his Padawan were ready too.

The lie of time melted under the onslaught of twin Jedi wills—brothers in arms, father and son in all but chance—master and learner slowing reality in an extrasensory blizzard accessible solely by surrender to that source which binds all the galaxy together.

The roiling fireballs consumed the Jedi warriors midflight. Then, plowing through the molasses of material reality, Obi-Wan and Anakin *erupted* from the cloud of flame like Fornax firebirds. Spearing lightsabers led as dervish bodies tunneled a vacuum through the scorching curls licking at the merest hint of unprotected matter—singeing Obi-Wan's tunic and charring his mane of hair.

The drones' surprise peeled through the Force. But the Jedi weren't done. As Anakin unspooled from his rotation, his mechano-arm whiplashed his lightsaber at the treasonous commandos. The slung saber flipped end over end like an unhinged rotor until ... *contact*. The dense armor of one of the disruptor-wielding troopers held as the emerald blade slashed across his chest ... but the blade continued, singing through the neck of one of the flame-throwing drones and slushing through unborn blood eater vats, rupturing them in a gush of embryonic fluids and ignominious death.

The remaining commandos didn't miss a beat.

Even as the Jedi landed—Obi-Wan flinging his burning outer tunic like a Kaleesh matador—two globes of cascading blue energy from a DC-17m rippled at them like amorphous eidolons. Military-grade stun blasts were designed to swaddle their targets like a net—just as they surely had earlier in the throne room. The Jedi general raised his blade to intercept the amoebic blast ... when suddenly his lightsaber coughed, winking out of existence.

The extreme cave heat and humidity had damaged his weapon far more than he'd imagined.

"Oh—*blast!*" Obi-Wan yelled.

But the shroud of unconsciousness never came.

In that split-second, Anakin rolled away from the concentric rings bearing down on him and slinged himself

into the path of those flying at his master, slashing his lightsaber two-handed through the paralyzing waves.

Immediately, the stun rings reacted, rapaciously collapsing on the weapon as Anakin swirled his laser sword in a whirlwind motion. The furious energy tangled around his green energy blade like a spider web on a stick—grazing his unarmored left hand and instantaneously deadening the appendage. But with his good hand, his *prosthetic* hand, Anakin snapped his lightsaber and hurled the stun blast back at their assailants.

While a drone's armor absorbed the hit, the blast clubbed the Sun Guard off balance, and Obi-Wan capitalized. Using the Force, he *scooped* the lab's myriad surgical instruments and sent them flying at the Tarks—ryyk blades, laser saws, and hypo-syringes all in barbaric unison, like a medley of primitive javelins. With his arm, he then slapped a table's worth of noxious flasks and vials into the air and—with a slight *push*—hurtled the malignant compounds at *one* Tark specifically.

The mixture of toxic chemicals bashed into Nilo's exposed face ... though this proved not as beneficial as Obi-Wan might have hoped. Blinded and shrieking, the commando captain's disruptor fired wildly. The deadly beam hit the floor, the walls, the ceiling, ricocheting frenetically off the ultrachrome paneling. Order broke down. Whole sections of the lab, already awash in ravenous fire, now scintillated into oblivion as holes in the floor opened up and ceiling segments rained down.

Commando and Jedi alike dove to keep from being disintegrated or crushed, when one drone dove directly into Nilo's erratic line of fire. In a terrifying lightshow, the disruptor blast hungrily chewed its way through his body as the Thyrsian screamed himself out of existence.

“Anakin! The *younglings!*” Obi-Wan shouted.

A disturbed look crossed his apprentice’s face. But Anakin nodded ... just as a large block of bloodstone crashed down on his shoulder, eliciting a profound *pop*. The Padawan slammed disoriented into the hard floor, but it wasn’t a second before the stars cleared from his sight, and the Jedi learner lurched himself painfully free of the ungainly block.

...And directly into the green point of a Sun Guard’s laser sight.

Anakin’s able arm instantly shot out—and the weakened wall behind the commando gave a monstrous moan. The soldier turned around just in time to see it, along with incubation tanks, breaking over him in a death-dealing avalanche of mutant and stone.

For a moment, Obi-Wan assumed the worst. But then there they were: the clone vats harboring the ten-year-old copies of himself and Anakin—still intact.

And, directly in front of *them* ... was Nilo. The last drone standing amid the strewn bodies of his alternately squashed and decollated comrades. The Sun Guard captain’s pallid face was sloughing off from the acidic chemicals, and a joyous, twisted grin only further deformed his hideous countenance. For in his hand, cranked back like a professional shockballer, glinted an unmistakable fist-sized silver sphere.

A *Class-D* detonator. Capable of vaporizing half the laboratory out of reality.

The *Jedi* half.

Obi-Wan noticed something in his peripheral vision. Suddenly, Anakin’s golden arm speared forward.

Obi-Wan cried, “No! *Wait—*”

Too late.

He felt it. The silent command in the Force ... like someone flicking a crumb from his dinner plate. Then, he heard it. Something inside the detonator clicked.

Then ... the dead Tarks, the young clones of Anakin and Obi-Wan, and Captain Nilo—still grinning—were ripped to pieces and swallowed in a zeptosecond into flawless nothingness.

A perfect semi-circle of the laboratory floor disappeared, opening into the lower level, along with an identical section of wall yawning toward the planet's dawn skies. A freezing emptiness colder than the vacuum of space cut into the Force like an open wound.

Obi-Wan whirled on Anakin.

At long last it was, for the Jedi general, too much.

The senseless deaths of Shard and her crew on the *Golandras*. The millions of senselessly starved and slaughtered S'kytri. Klarymére and Kharys. The clones....

The ... younglings.

The oppressive, unconditional emptiness of the *Class-D* annihilation was palpable. The ultimate affront to life ... and the Force.

Obi-Wan's defenses at last disintegrated. Anakin ... Anakin *never* listened.

...And with his defenses at last crumbled this perfect warrior's immaculate composure. Hot, cloying *anger* flooded in, and Obi-Wan did not fight it ... allowing himself this failure of control as he at last succumbed, and *unleashed* the years of disappointment and genuine rage on his reckless, impetuous, *selfish* Padawan....

"I TOLD YOU, ANAKIN! NO DISINTEG—"

"That *wasn't* me!" Anakin said.

And that's ... when Obi-Wan saw him.

The blast door had lifted. And there stood Halagad. One frighteningly steady hand—or rather, the charred stumps of his severed fingers—unmistakably extended toward the area atomized by the detonator ... the other hand holding his lightsaber toward the ground.

His cloak and tunic were shredded. His Medallion of Honor hung over his blood-smeared armor. Cracks in his shattered battle gear exposed penetrating gashes on his thigh, chest and arms. What looked alarmingly like huge *bites* taken out of his shoulder and bicep coverings disclosed hunks of missing tissue, blackened like his missing digits by cauterization. His intact hand was dripping and sleeved up to the shoulder in some viscous, royal blue ichor, while his face, too, was splashed with slime.

But his *eyes*.

His irises were that familiar, soft shade of brown they always had been. But the *whites* surrounding them were no longer white. Instead, they'd become ghastly receptacles of deep scarlet—filled to bursting with blood.

Halagad's gaze fixed on his burning cobalt blade, those stigmatic eyes unblinking, as if on the verge of weeping crimson.

"Magnus," he said at last, "is dead."

Chapter Twenty-Two

At the piedmont of an anonymous sierra, Obi-Wan stared into the indisputable visage of Jango Fett.

“No trace of the Thyrsian drones, General Kenobi,” the man said. “But we did recover the body in the hangar. What was left of it.”

Clones... Obi-Wan reminded himself. *Not Jango.*

“Good work,” Anakin cut in. “Have your men put it in a stasis booth entropy field when we rendezvous with the *Resolute*.”

“I’ll see to it personally, Commander.”

The clone trooper turned to leave, raising his blue-trimmed helmet over his head as he did so.

“Sirs?” he called, looking over his shoulder.

“Yes? What is it, Rex.” Obi-Wan inquired.

“Never,” the clone captain said, “trust a Thyrsian to do the proper job of a Mandalorian.”

In spite of everything, Obi-Wan’s lip pulled into a quarter-smile. “We’ll try to remember that, Captain.”

“I’ll see that you do.” Rex pulled his helmet on, and turned to Anakin. “And you might try—” *ktunktunk* “—one of these next time, sir.”

As the soldier hustled over to one of his brothers, Anakin touched the wound scabbing along his eye.

The Padawan let out a haggard breath. “I swear I’ll never ask for more obedient clones again,” he said.

“Rex and Cody have their moments,” Obi-Wan conceded. “But at least we know whose side they’re on.”

Obi-Wan watched as CC-7567—Rex—and the yellow-emblazoned CC-2224—Cody—escorted the two vast halves of Zeta Magnus’ lifeless corpse independently on separate grav-stretchers.

Meanwhile, other clone troopers loaded the remains of Magnus’ lab—instruments, cloning tanks, and blood eater pups—into a Republic gunship.

“We’ll have some explaining to do when we report to Master Windu,” Obi-Wan said.

Halagad said nothing.

He had told them how it happened. Halagad had chased the cloner and his battle droid into the fortress hangar, upon which he declared the Magister under arrest. A vicious battle ensued. While his droid Blue-Tark prepped Magnus’ alien starfighter, the cyber-geneticist attacked Halagad head on. Despite his size, the cloner propelled his copious physique in combat with the stunning grace of a Quarren aquatic

ballerina, wielding his lethal halberd and a complimentary Tlönian shield with homicidal, even Jedi-like, efficiency. They locked weapons, and Magnus forthrightly made a dinner of Halagad's arm, champing a mouthful out of his limb, armor and all, and scything the digits of his hand.

The lightsaber slipped from the Padawan's nonexistent grip ... Magnus taunting him as, one by one, the monster disappeared the dismembered fingers into his gullet like Chandrilan hors d'oeuvres.

According to Halagad, from that point, his memory grew hazy. He remembered Magnus bawling his betrayal at the T-series droid as the engines of his starfighter ignited and blasted off ... simultaneously drowning the Magister in a deluge of blue, radioactive ionic fire—not killing him, but transforming the cloner into a tower of burning insanity. Halagad acting—his lightsaber slapping back into his palm as this hurricane of irradiated hell struck in equal parts sundering steel and incinerating cyanic flame, the monster's melting flesh flying from his immolating body like broiling projectiles—until Halagad *lunged*, upper-cutting his blade, hilt to shoulder, into the living inferno, punching clear through the geneticist's spectacular corpulence....

But Magnus was unstoppable. And the monster's cyber-fanged, milling maw bore down on the Padawan's face....

And the next thing Halagad knew, Magnus was dimidiated.

Sai tok—the lightsaber maneuver for cleaving one's opponent asunder.

Just as Obi-Wan had Darth Maul.

He left me no choice, Halagad said. If only by the look of him, it was difficult to doubt it. But there was something else Obi-Wan recognized in his demeanor, something hidden

behind that once-penetrating stare—a familiar sag to the man’s shoulders.

It was the same haunting look Anakin bore since burying his mother on Tatooine ... the same look he’d seen on Kharys as the blood eaters orphaned the girl right before her eyes.

Did Obi-Wan have it, too ... since Qui-Gon?

And there was also ... the chilling stigmata marking Halagad’s eyes, refusing to wash off with the rest of Magnus’ indigotic blood. Obi-Wan had seen a comparable mark only twice before. Once, during his youth at the temple, when a Sikurdian adolescent flew into a vicious rage after being rejected for continued training as a Jedi Knight. Jagged lines like lightning had necrotized up the boy’s neck and tentacles, and he nearly cut down Master Tera Sinube.

And the other time was inside the Entyrmion ... with the tear-like blotch that had materialized on Kharys’ face following her bloody rampage.

Each mark manifested itself differently. But each came from an unnatural anger that boiled out from within, exploding the body’s capillaries at random.

Each mark came ... from a wholesale surrender to the dark side of the Force.

“We had no choice, Master,” Anakin said. The stun blast’s effects abated, he placed a reassuring hand on Halagad’s shoulder. “We did what we had to. And now Skye is free. Master Windu may not understand, but Chancellor Palpatine will.”

It was true. Skye *was* free. During the obsequies for Klarymére and the crew of the *Golandras*, Speaker Nebaél promised to honor the patriarch’s pledge of eternal fealty to the Jedi trio. But the Highland and Lowland Clans had

suffered untold casualties during the attack on Magnus' citadel.

We are grateful for your assistance, Outworlders, and will honor our obligation to you, Nebaél had clarified. *But this catastrophe has only proven our worst fears. Wherever walkers tread, the gales of destruction blow. Skye will never again, in good conscience, welcome another walker.*

On the bright side, the Ministry of Science had successfully cultivated an antidote for the biologically altered Outland Clan. Though too little too late for the many mutants wiped out in battle, Skye's surviving ritual outcasts would have another chance.

Thus goes "victory" in war, Obi-Wan thought.

Or is it ... clone wars?

He recalled the simulacra of Anakin and himself atomized in the lab, Nilo and the treacherous Tarks, and, of course, Magnus himself—the product of Arkanian cloners' perverse fancies. The Senate Bureau of Intelligence insisted the Confederacy was developing scores of superweapons, including a battle droid answer to the Republic's covert-ops commandos—but some believed the Separatists had plans to grow their *own* clone army. Dooku's uncanny omnipresence and elusiveness since the war began had spawned murmurs of the existence of a "Clone Dooku," and rumor had even sprung that the Mandalorian Supercommandos, decimated by the count himself years ago, were being resurrected as a Separatist strike force by the son of Jango. Obi-Wan still remembered Fett's "son," the unaltered clone Boba, from his time on Kamino—a boy far too young to lead any elite army. Still, the Jedi general didn't know what to believe anymore.

Obi-Wan sighed.

"How do you think Magnus switched in his clone warriors for ours?" Anakin asked.

Once you've seen one clone, the tyrant had mocked, *you've seen them all*. In truth, part of Obi-Wan *had* avoided looking into the clone troopers' indistinguishable faces ... hadn't wanted to see past their expressionless masks at the stone-cold visage of Jango ... hadn't wanted to look past the dead bounty hunter's features and see these clones he'd be ordering to their deaths for what they were.

People.

Young men.

Like Anakin. Like Halagad.

An army of ... brothers.

"Master..." Halagad spoke at last. "Mace Windu said the Tarks came directly from Kamino, remember? That means he or Agent Trachta might know who authorized the transfer."

Obi-Wan fixed him with a calculating look—unable, despite himself, to ignore the Padawan's unnerving stare. Agent Trachta, an ambitious intelligencer, often served as the liaison between the Jedi Council and SBI Director Armand Isard.

"It's *possible*, Commander," Obi-Wan admitted.

Halagad seemed to visibly flinch at his response ... and Obi-Wan realized he'd accidentally regressed into calling the Padawan by his formal military rank.

"I can look into it," Halagad said. "General."

It *had* been unintentional—

—hadn't it?

"But the real question," Anakin put forward, "is those ... younglings in the lab. Even if Magnus *could* grow clones of us in hours, we weren't out for even thirty *minutes*."

"Yes..." Obi-Wan said.

"It had to have been a trick," Anakin suggested—not especially convincing.

“But if not,” Obi-Wan reasoned, “he would’ve had to have had previous access to our blood and tissue samples. Analysis-grade. Not rare, but generally restricted to medical settings.”

“They’d be samples taken before we joined up with Hal, then.”

“Then we have a lead.”

“I can look into that,” Anakin said. “And, Master ... there’s something else. The girl Kharys.”

“Yes?”

“She’s ... I sense she’s still alive.”

The general frowned. The girl’s loyal retainer, Aragh, had told Obi-Wan the slain S’kytri bodies had fallen from the sky in droves, some making futilely for Mount Krisklar to die. *Who knows how many lie sun-rotting on the bluffs above us*, Aragh said. The retainer had personally scoured the landscape around Canaitith for any sign of Kharys’ body, to no avail.

“Anakin, I—”

“She’s *alive*, Master,” his apprentice insisted. “And ... I think we should take her with us.”

Obi-Wan’s brows knitted. “Take her with us?”

“To train her.”

“*Train* her?” Obi-Wan echoed. “You’re not even a full Jedi Knight yet.”

“I don’t mean make her *my* apprentice,” Anakin clarified.

“Well, I certainly hope you’re not suggesting I make her *mine*. I’ve got all the Padawan learners I can handle.”

“No, I mean ... she *saved our lives*. Someone else at the temple could take responsibility—”

“Someone *else* can take *responsibility*?”

“That’s, no, that’s not what I mean.”

“What *do* you mean, Anakin?”

“She’s ... *strong* in the Force, Master!” He pleaded. “She’s ... alone.”

For a while, the Jedi general said nothing, and Anakin seemed to light up with hope. But then, Obi-Wan simply shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You saw her in the caves. She’s not stable.”

“Not stable? Obi-Wan, Halagad just *bisected* our target and *vaporized* youngling versions of you and me! And you think *Kharys* is unstable?”

Anakin abruptly froze open-mouthed as his crystal clear eyes met Halagad’s blood-desolated gaze.

Anakin looked away.

“Sorry.”

But Halagad said nothing.

“My final answer is no,” Obi-Wan said. “The girl is just—”

“Just what, Master?” Anakin snapped. “Just another ‘pathetic life-form?’”

Obi-Wan made an effort not to wince. He had lectured Halagad frequently about lacking sensitivity ... but *no one* was as sensitive as Anakin.

Except maybe Qui-Gon.

“—She’s just *too old*,” Obi-Wan finished. “And understand Anakin, I may occasionally express myself bluntly, but Jedi must be *mindful* of spreading their compassions too thin. I deeply value those individuals *closest* to me, even while ... *grossly* aware of *my* limitations.”

For a tense instant, Anakin’s eyes searched his master’s, feverishly sifting for the slightest sign of insincerity. Then ... the Padawan’s cheeks puffed in submission, and his accusing gaze faltered.

Obi-Wan permitted himself a sliver of relief. His earnest confession seemed to have done it, diffusing his emotionally volatile apprentice.

That is, until his *other* apprentice spoke up.

“General Kenobi’s absolutely right,” Halagad asserted, his eyes downcast. “The girl’s *much* too old for training.”

Again agape, this time in shock, Anakin said, “You’re joking, Hal. Right?”

Halagad licked his lips.

“Ani...” He looked up with those crimson eyes, pointing at his bandaged head with the stump of a half-severed finger. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

Any semblance of Anakin’s fragile calm was obliterated. “Hal, you were almost as old as *I am now* when you became a Padawan!”

“*And it wasn’t easy*,” Halagad countered. “I was studying and training to become a Jedi my *whole life* before I found a master.”

Anakin sneered, gripping his belt with both hands. “From baby’s holobooks and fairy tales.”

Halagad frowned. “Brother, they weren’t all baby’s books ... and it was a lot more than some whiny skugs did before being proclaimed a boy of destiny.”

“Padawans...” Obi-Wan said.

“What then, *Nerfherder*?” Anakin shot back. “You’re the *exception* to the rules?”

“*An* exception, yeah. Or did you think you were the only one, *my lord*?”

Anakin nodded ... smiling coldly.

“I get it,” he said. “So now *you* want to be the Chosen One. Is that it?” A ripple of confusion fluttered in the Force.

Halagad's face darkened ... only to resolve itself into a merciless conclusion.

"No, Rimmer. I don't need some stupid prophecy telling me I'm special so I can forget being born a worthless slave."

Without warning, Anakin's golden armature reached forward ... grabbing Halagad's medallion. "Sure—all *you* need to feel special, *Nerfherder*, is this stupid brick you slobber over like your ten-credit mistress. Until the day you get tired of it, too."

"Skywalker ... watch your scum-sucking mouth."

"Padawans, that's *enough!*" Obi-Wan said. "You are *Jedi* and commanders in the *Grand Army* of—"

"Watch yours," Anakin said. "Youngling killer."

"At least I don't salivate as I slowly *spit-roast* 'em on my lightsaber, *Chosen One*."

"No, you just abandon them ... like you did Tia and Nial."

Then it happened.

Halagad's palms slammed into Anakin's chest, and he stumbled back—still clutching the Medallion of Honor. The medal's aurodium chain resisted valiantly, then ... *snap*.

All was silent, as all three Jedi stared dumb at the gold disk in Anakin's cold, mechanical hand.

And then ... the recoil.

Halagad yanked the Jedi weapon off his belt and, intercepting Anakin's eyes, *smashed* the borrowed blue laser sword with every last fraction of his might at the other Padawan's feet. Anakin jumped instinctively as something in his lightsaber audibly *popped* as it struck the ground. Halagad then snatched his own green lightsaber from Anakin's waist, stalking away even as the cylinder flipped through the air into his bandaged, disfigured hand.

Obi-Wan was beside himself—and was about to upbraid Halagad when Anakin, appraising his crippled weapon, offered his own candid analysis of the situation.

“SON OF A MAGGOT-FORNICATING SLIME DOG!”

Words. A progenitorial slur only in the literalest sense.

But with things spiraling out of control, Obi-Wan now turned to chastise *Anakin*....

And that’s when there came the unmistakable, crisp report of a sizzling *snap-biss*.

Despite the look of surprise on Anakin’s face, he reacted in a streaking blur. The Medallion of Honor slid from his hand as his arms crisscrossed, telekinetically snatching his lightsaber at his feet and the one at Obi-Wan’s waist, igniting both azure blades into a defensive X even before the medal had kissed the dirt. Even so, Halagad’s hellish charge was just too powerful.

The jade energy brand crashed down, devastating Anakin’s defense as his own damaged lightsaber instantly sputtered and died. As his back hit the ground, his mechano-arm locked a death grip around Obi-Wan’s blade as both it and Halagad’s glowing swords gnashed sparks a hairsbreadth from the gash—the *bull’s-eye*—on Anakin’s face, Halagad’s visage twisted in hideous rage.

“My *SLIME-DOG* mother is *DEAD!*” Halagad snarled. “My *MAGGOT-FORNICATING* father is *DEAD!* *They were ... THEY WERE EATEN ALIVE!* By that ... psychotic, putrefying, *dung-swollen* spawn of evil I sent to Molator!” Devastation welled in his eyes. “Do you understand?! *You arrogant, stone-hearted slave bastard—*”

He never finished. For Anakin, *sensitive* Anakin—born to slavery, son of prophecy, a man wholly unable to let die nor

die to his boyish truths—had saved all his self-poisoning *fear*, all his self-immolating *anger*, all his self-devouring *suffering*—his deepest, most desperate and suffocating secret—for last.

“SHE DIED IN MY ARMS! YOU SNIVELING, JEDI REJECT! BUT AT LEAST YOU HAD A FATHER!”

Words—only words. But they *exploded* from Anakin with the unbridled seismic energy of a thousand volcanic powers. The psychic payload *blasted* Halagad airborne and nearly impaled him on his own lightsaber as it flew from his mutilated grip.

Like a thunderbolt, Anakin lunged to his feet over his defenseless Jedi brother, Obi-Wan’s lightsaber in hand. He ratcheted the blazing laser sword back and overhead like the apparition of death—

“ANAKIN! ANAKIN, NO!”

—and *screaming* down.

A pitiless *crack* slammed into Anakin’s entire body, like a fleet of starship-sized colossus wasps suiciding into a moon, skidding him across the scathing gravel.

Obi-Wan lowered the palm of his unsteady right hand as Anakin looked up, eyes wild with recrimination.

“Have you completely lost your *minds?!?*” Obi-Wan said. “Switch off your lightsabers, and give them to me! *Immediately!?*”

At first, neither Padawan moved. There was only the scorching hum of Obi-Wan’s lightsaber in Anakin’s hand, Halagad’s back in his, and Anakin’s blade furiously spitting sparks between them, frantically trying to reignite.

The combatants gauged one another like rival krayt dragons, gulping and ejecting hot breath. Then, the watery

melody of retreat sounded as Halagad shut down his lightsaber.

Anakin immediately did so also, and straight away rose to his feet. But as Halagad got up, he handed over his weapon to Obi-Wan first. His hemorrhaged eyes tightened to dark slits on Anakin ... but, before a moment, softened to something nearly sympathetic.

“At least,” Halagad said, “you *have* a father.”

The statement hung in the ether as Halagad turned pointedly to Obi-Wan, intercepting his smoky irises ... the Jedi general meeting his glance with disciplined neutrality.

Halagad shifted his blood-filled glance first and, with his good hand, picked his medallion up off the ground.

“*Everything alright there, General?*” said a voice over Obi-Wan’s comlink.

“Jedi business,” Obi-Wan said. “Everything’s fine, Cody.”

But Halagad was already marching—limping—himself toward the Republic gunship.

Anakin threw his hand up in the other Padawan’s direction. “You’re just going to let him get *away* with that?”

Obi-Wan turned to Anakin. Palm extended.

“*Give it to me.*”

Anakin hesitated, his eyes piercing Obi-Wan’s. The wildness was gone from them, but in its place Obi-Wan recognized a frighteningly inexpressive emptiness ... as if his apprentice were sizing him up.

...But Anakin’s chin dipped, and he handed over his master’s weapon.

Obi-Wan hooked the two lightsabers to his belt. He then bent down and carefully picked up Anakin’s glitching blade—effortlessly removing its power cell.

“Anakin, you may or may *not* be the Chosen One,” Obi-Wan said, his tone hard as durasteel. “But if you *ever* act this way toward a Jedi brother again, you will certainly *not* be any brother of *mine*.”

Obi-Wan felt a severe jolt of fear run through the young man, and he had to suppress the feeling of guilt that cut through his heart. Suddenly, the Jedi Council’s admonishment against attachments made only too perfect sense.

Turning his back to Anakin, he too made for the ship.

But he’d taken not even a dozen steps when his pupil’s resentful tone stretched the distance like a lariat.

“I’m *no child*, Obi-Wan,” Anakin yelled out. “When will I get my lightsaber back?”

Obi-Wan halted midstride, his Padawan’s lightsaber still clenched in his fist. The young master seemed to turn with disquieting care until finally those silver eyes, old beyond their years, speared his pupil with a look that could fission a nuclear atom.

Anakin’s defiance wavered ... not for a second.

Then, with a strange look of sadness, Obi-Wan turned back toward the ship ... a man unable to resign himself to a terrible, inevitable truth.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Anakin stood alone, silently watching the impossibly high peaks of Skye. He exhaled a heavy, halting breath.

All of the sudden, he felt all of nine years old again ... asking Qui-Gon what a midi-chlorian was.

“Ani?”

For a split-second, he imagined the voice was Padmé’s. But when Anakin spun around, he saw only a frail and tattered angel. “You’re *alive*...” he said.

Anakin laid eyes on the girl—her fingers clamped uncertainly into the inner knuckles of opposite fingers, Kharys’ adolescent lime skin burnt, cut and deeply bruised, her wings torn and her hair blood-matted—that small, pear-

shaped blotch marring her cheek, those vivid green eyes stricken by....

Fear.

It was at last, for Ani, too much.

A childish instinct unexpectedly seized him. Anakin lowered his head, eyes hot, clenching his jaw shut with all his incalculable power ... determined not to give in to nature, not caring if all his teeth shattered.

“What’s wrong?” the girl asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “Nothing’s wrong....” When finally he looked up, he managed a smile. “How long have you been there? I didn’t sense you.”

“A while,” she said, pointing to a large boulder. “You were ... distracted.”

“I worried ... we lost you.”

She interlocked her fingers. “I detonated the concussion missile, with the Force of the Great Wind ... but the blast still hit me. I struck the rocks and fell unconscious.”

“You *saved* us,” he said.

“You tried to save my father.... I had to come back.”

He nodded. “Your father was right—you will be a great matriarch.”

She smiled.

“I ... saw you fighting with your Jedi brothers,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“They’re not my brothers. Not really.” His arms fell to his sides as he turned away again to the endless sierras. His left hand flicked restlessly, a nervous reflex from his days as Watto’s slave. “I just ... I miss my mother.”

“And your father?”

“No. I don’t have one of those.”

Kharys was silent. But Anakin knew that quiet well. A quiet so exacting it betrays itself as the artifact of dishonesty.

When he turned back to her, crystal beads were silently bending their way through the maze of wounds on her youthful, beautiful face.

Walking to her, Anakin took her hands.

"Kharys," he said, "I promise you, when this war's over ... I'll find a way to have you trained as a Jedi."

Looking up, her rippling emerald eyes searched his. "A Jedi ... like you?"

"Like me. Would you like that?"

The girl's face burst in emotion. She flung her arms around Anakin's neck, wrapping him head to shins in the soft leather of her wings.

"Yes!"

"*Woah*, okay," Anakin said. "Okay. Well, in the meantime, I want you to be patient. Like a *good* Jedi. Go back to your clan, and as soon as I can ... I'll come back for you."

"Okay!" She said. "*Okay!*"

Her giant wings meted out a powerful thrash, and suddenly Kharys shot up toward the honeyed sky and away, as if intent on immediately doing as he said.

Only, as Anakin put his hand to his brow, shielding his eyes from the rays of Marat Prime, he saw her hanging in the air. Her wings beat rhythmically as a look of indecision crossed her face.

Then, before he knew it, the girl swooped down and pressed her lips to his.

For a heartbeat, her emerald eyes riveted into his sky blue. Then the young girl bolted back into the firmament, heading toward one of the distant peaks in the vast landscape ... never looking back.

Anakin was then alone again among the interminable mountain ranges of Skye.

He smiled ... unconsciously flexing his prosthetic hand. Then he too turned and headed for the ship.

His queen was waiting for him.

POSTLUDIUM

In the furthest reaches of the galaxy, deep in the principality known to a select as the Dark Worlds—

In the heart of the opulent Rennek palace, swathed in vestments not unlike those of Onderon's Magi Sentinels—

Upon an immense, jewel-encrusted throne of aurodium—reposed a monster of like dimensions and unprejudiced appetites.

Holding an ionite tray beside him, bearing a bottle of spice wine, a mouth-watering side of Arkanian diamonds, and a pile of raw meat was a stoic, white-haired, and pigmentless soldier. A mercenary, to be precise.

“You know Mongo Beefhead’s no good for you,” the Sun Guard said.

Armed with a pair of Asogian grub-sticks, the monster pinched a single diamond from the tiny jewel mountain on his plate—scrutinizing with golden eyes, perchance, for imperfections.

A gutted, royal blue automaton entered the chamber, ambulating with a briskness that belied its stiff, robotically muscular appearance ... shuffling past the hundreds of suspended bodies lining the throne room.

As the battle droid bowed theatrically before its master, the monster at last slid the Arkanian gem down his repulsive, dianoga-like craw ... liberating a profound sigh.

“What news do you bear, Blue-Tark?” that bass of grating rust inquired.

“I regret to inform my Magister,” the tactical droid preambled, stereophonic and feminine, “the Jedi Knights have destroyed the drones.”

“All of them?”

“The accelerated transgenic decoy as well, sire.”

The white-haired Thyrsonian beside the throne, studying the throngs of clone cylinders filling the chamber with his own ashen features, cleared his throat.

“Man—” the Sun Guard ventured somberly. “—droid and monarch alike is but a composite of technicalities. Enshrined by his promises. To quote that great thinker, Plaristes.”

“Alas—” the monster riposted. “—time, pitiless time, is that selfsame tyrant before which *all* are humble.” Wiping his infernal mouth, he extended a gargantuan hand. “Now then, Sarsius, my drumheller harp, please. For I have a promise to keep ... to a Dark Lord.”

The mercenary willfully did as he was ordered.

And as monstrous fingers plucked the strings of that marvelous instrument, a mellifluous sound such as was meant but only as for the ears of the space-gods *filled* the chamber ... carrying across, by alien science, to all the worlds of this barbaric kingdom ... and broadcast into the known galaxy for *all* her citizens—in every home, in every workplace, and in every plaza, in every eatery and establishment, and every starship and in every vehicle—to *relish*.

And in that storm of melodical rapture, Sarsius Torne reflected wistfully:

“Never ... send a clone to do the proper job of an anthropophagite.”

And as the *first* promised Republic planet died, drowning in plagues—

The monster ... played.

The End

LONE WOLF
A Tale of Obi-Wan and Luke

Chapter One

“There there, young Skywalker.”

From outside the cockpit of the grounded starfighter, the savaging rain of the moon Nar Shaddaa poured with merciless fury. The noise frazzled the nerves of both of the stolen ship’s occupants, pummeling the transparisteel of the gunmetal Belbullab-22 with a terrible rapid-fire ferocity as if they were diving through a Polis Massa meteor shower or under attack from a hail of frag grenade shrapnel.

The bearded man knew how to cope with the natural biological reaction of the human body to irritating, unyielding stimulus. Most of it, anyway. But his diminutive companion did not.

“There there, my young Padawan....”

Dark crescents of fatigue had taken permanent residence beneath Obi-Wan’s eyes. Not so much because of the uncomfortable interior of the starship—more suited to a body of servos and steel than flesh and blood—nor because of all he had endured in the past few cataclysmic days.

The collapse of the Republic. The slaying of all the thousands of Jedi Knights. And the loss of his brother, Anakin.

But because of the tightly wrapped bundle in the back seat.

The infant—not even a day old—voiced his disapproval at the decibel level with all the protest his tiny larynx and lungs could muster. Miniscule fits of movement corrugated the blanket in which he was swathed.

“There there, Luke,” Obi-Wan said.

Something in the Jedi’s words beyond the natural seemed to soothe the little being, and his potent cry died down to a meager gripe. The baby boy’s unstill eyes searched Obi-Wan’s face until abruptly locking on his caretaker’s eyes with a sudden solemnity that frightened and stirred Obi-Wan’s heart.

The Jedi Master pulled his hood up over his head as he opened the canopy.

“Up we go,” he said, scooping up the babe.

Wetness instantly soaked through his simple brown garment. He had gone through at least six or seven Jedi robes since the Clone Wars began. One of them had even been a birthday gift from Anakin. Now, this was likely to be the only one he’d have for a very long time.

The newly established Galactic Empire had already begun its chokehold on freedom, all but shutting down public access

to the HoloNet. But thankfully, Obi-Wan's conveyance—the ex-starship of the *ex-living* General Grievous—was still hooked in. Even so, the Jedi Master had no way to contact Luke's living relatives, Beru and Owen Lars, to tell them he was coming to Tatooine. Not without endangering their lives ... along with Luke's and his own. He just had to trust in the Force that the Larses would accept Anakin's son. Or the duty would fall to Obi-Wan.

Of course, Owen would want to know what had happened to his brother.

Obi-Wan had technically never met Owen and knew little about the man. Only what Anakin had told him: that Lars was a married man and the son of a moisture farmer who had wed Shmi Skywalker.

But the Force worked in strange ways.

Rain pelted the Jedi Master as he held his charge close to him and climbed down the starfighter's side ladder.

Years and years ago, during his time as Qui-Gon's apprentice, Obi-Wan had experienced a strange vision ... of his mother and his father. Of course, he had been taken from them at too early an age to seemingly have any legitimate recollection of his parents. But Jedi had often reported such "memories" of their progenitors, somehow preserved by the Force.

But that wasn't what was unusual.

Obi-Wan hopped the last steps to the ground—landing softly.

What *was* unusual was that, in that vision, he also remembered a brother.

A brother named *Owen*.

Obi-Wan had told Qui-Gon about the vision, and his old master had responded that through the Force, Jedi could see

many things. Sometimes, the past. Sometimes, the future. Indeed, for years Obi-Wan *had* believed it was only a memory. But when Anakin told him about the Larses—and Shmi's fate—he began to suspect that that might only be true from a certain point of view.

You were my brother, Anakin! I loved you....

Obi-Wan closed his eyes to the image of his Padawan, his brother—his son, in everything but name—butchered by his own hand. Burning alive and screaming into the fires of infernal Mustafar.

I HATE YOU!

Luke began to cry.

He bounced the distraught child in his arms, fatherly panic cutting through him more primitively than any ever had even facing the manifold lightsabers of Grievous or Darth Maul.

Obi-Wan had not truly allowed himself to love anything in a long time. But he had loved Anakin.

Now, Anakin was dead.

He looked into Luke's angelic face. Like that of his mother. Those sorrowful eyes the same hypnotic blue of his father.

Obi-Wan *tried* not to love him.

He tried for fear that, as everyone he had loved—Qui-Gon, Siri, Satine, Anakin—this one too would suffer their fate.

Obi-Wan never had, and almost certainly, never would have his own biological children. For a moment, he considered withholding intensifying feeling ... but he knew his duty would not allow it.

Compassion, Anakin had argued with him, was a Jedi's *duty*. And compassion, in its purest form, was synonymous with *unconditional love*.

Obi-Wan had told his young Padawan that his free interpretation of the Jedi Code was *flawed*.

But in his heart, he'd always known.

You were right, my Padawan.

And in that moment, Obi-Wan could hold back no longer.

The Jedi Master surrendered. Surrendered to the only sincere alternative his conscience would ever allow.

He would *love* Luke. Always. And he would protect him. *Always*. Like a bloodwolf his only cub.

And, if necessary, he would die for him.

Chapter Two

“These *flash* storms...” the attendant declared—as if her incomplete observation amounted to a deeper truth. “It’s the dark season.”

With enormous eyes, she looked up from her datapad and through the overhead landing portal of Docking Bay 728 as the needles of rain suddenly vanished, leaving only soggiess in their wake and the lingering scent of ozone.

Despite this pungent wetness, the harsh odor of fuel penetrated to Obi-Wan’s nasal passages, assaulting him like a bad case of Ardroxian flu. He could only imagine what it was doing to Luke ... or the trunk-nosed administrator.

“Keezx,” the Jedi Master concurred. “Un barboono seezna.” *Yes. A very dark season.*

The docking bay attendant—a stub-legged, fat-bottomed, proboscis-sporting pachydermoid balanced on robo-stilts—turned very slowly to look at him. Surely more so for dramatic effect, given the great size of her eyeballs, than necessity.

“Bazi batza Bocce?” she asked. *Do you speak Bocce?*

“Pinti.” *A little.*

The Jedi knew snatches of the intersystem traders’ tongue. But he knew that on a debased world like the Smuggler’s Moon, an unprompted recourse to Bocce was a kind of secret handshake: an invitation to the initiation of illicit dealing.

And based on the way the docking bay attendant was now ogling his ship, and the way her chunky tail twitched, she had evidently taken the bait.

The conspicuousness of the starfighter notwithstanding, the recent chaos of events had forced Obi-Wan to appropriate Grievous’ ship from the docking bay of his friend Bail Organa’s Corellian corvette. He had, after all, brought the Belbullab-22 there in the first place, after neutralizing the cybernetic commander. But he knew he would have to dump the starship the first chance he got. Nar Shaddaa, a notorious den of degeneracy, had been the natural choice.

The Hutt moon was a convenient stopover on their way to the Outer Rim. It was a place where few questions were asked and criminal transactions were as convenient as a galactic senator’s loyalties. But Obi-Wan had one other reason for coming here, to so-called “Little Coruscant.”

He knew that Jedi Masters Tholme and T’ra Saa had been here before the Republic’s clone troopers had turned on their

generals, his Jedi brothers and sisters. He knew it was a long shot, but he hoped the Force might lead him to them.

If Obi-Wan wasn't mistaken, this docking attendant was a Pacithhip: a waist-high, elephantine people renowned for their stoicism. Notably, though, she wasn't wearing pants.

That is to say, like many, if not most, of her race venturing beyond their homeworld, she wore height-augmenting robo-stilts. But unlike most members of her species, she did not conceal these in shame behind a pair of trousers. Obi-Wan chewed over the bizarre juxtaposition: a Pacithhip self-assured enough to flaunt her artificial height, yet not bold enough to ditch the apparatus completely. It did not speak of an uncomplicated mind.

But that one lingering look of hers at the Belbullab had told Obi-Wan everything he needed to know; she had her snout deep in the trough of the local Invisible Market.

"*Zat un gonzo stuur sheep* you're flying," she said, toggling nonchalantly between Bocce and Basic.

"Gonzo?"

The heavy-set creature twitched her trunk and snorted out her giant nostrils with a sound akin to pity.

"Cool,' wizzard,' 'koovy' ... those more your speed, star-boy?"

"There's no cause for incivility, my long-legged friend."

Her giant irises fell on the bundle in Obi-Wan's arms.

"You won't say that after half an hour here," she said. "What's her name?"

"It's a boy."

"I meant the ship."

Obi-Wan frowned inwardly. "Demeezz bo treeza *Spineless One*." *Her name's the Spineless One.*

The Pacithhip's honking laughter just about burst Luke's miniscule eardrums, and nearly knocked the alien off her robotic struts.

"Now I *am* afraid to ask the boy's name," she confessed.

In truth, the Belbullab-22 starfighter went by the nom de guerre *Soulless One*. Apt for a monster such as Grievous. The cyborg's willingness to proudly *name* his ship that only reflected to what depths of despair he'd let himself sink. But the recreant Separatist general had used the ship to flee losing battles often enough that Master Quinlan Vos had rechristened it with the less-flattering pseudonym.

Quin ... who now was likely dead. Like all their Jedi brethren.

"Motex nommi, star-boy?" the Pacithhip asked. *What's your name?*

Almost automatically, Obi-Wan exhumed the alias he last used while undercover here in the Nal Hutta system. A very personal patronymic.

"Ben," he answered.

"Detox selzi gonzo stuur sheep, Ben?" *You want to sell your slick starship, Ben?*

"Yezzo." Obi-Wan confirmed. "Butimoz hiz proxy maarzet? Meeza hokokeez yolats noy'occul." *Can you direct me to the nearest local market? I have difficulty when they're invisible.* He released some credits into her four-fingered mitt.

The Pacithhip's greedy trunk scooped up the gold Peggats for closer inspection and her eyes lit up. "*Keezx. Keezx...*" she nodded, her impassivity faltering under the prospect. She pointed a chubby digit in a southerly direction. "Go up the main thoroughfare here ... past the Red Sector until you run into New Vertica. Then make a left at Champio Muni. Then a

secondary quick left at Xyx'w'zwQuqu. Go under the crumbling mag-lev bridge, and take a right at Nobadnobaya."

Obi-Wan tried to keep it all straight. "The name?"

"Paolo's Chop Shop."

"Is the proprietor fair?"

"Fair *and* discreet. Explain that Shnozitski sent you."

"*Shno*zitski?"

She stroked her long proboscis self-consciously. "Laugh it up, star-boy. I was raised by Squib traders. It's short for Shnozitskigante-maximilliana."

"I'm of a mind they loved you." Obi-Wan clinked two additional Peggats into her prehensile snout. "Thank you for your time."

Chapter Three

Shnozitski finished putting in the commo to Paolo's Chop Shop and sending along a nice series of holo images of Ben's ship, working out a decent referral fee. Life on Nar Shaddaa might have killed her Squibbian accent, but it had yet to blunt her killer instinct.

You can take the junk-dealer out of the Squab system, she reflected. *But you can't take the deal out of junk.*

And this outlander's ship was a *magnificent* piece of junk. She shuffled distractedly on her robo-stilts—embarrassments to her, but handmade from the skilled furry paws of her adopted parents. A reminder of where she came from, where the streets were paved in rejectamenta. Of home.

And on that note, the Pacithhip felt there was one more comm call to make.

“Riley?” she said, scrutinizing ... something very, *very* interesting on her datapad news feed. “Okay, Okay: Banda. It’s me, Shnoz. Yeah, yeah, very funny—I can’t ever tell you Chiggers apart, so that makes us even. Listen. For a fifty-one-percent fee, I have a tremendous opportunity for you. You bet. And ... you might need help from my ‘little friends’ for this one.”

A few more trivial details, and the deal was done.

Shnozitski ended the call. Her parents, Jaquilinbella-bessamáрте and Rikkimikvonsantikki the Fifty-Fourth, would be proud.

Chapter Four

The curious looks Obi-Wan received carrying Luke in his arms were few and far between. A lone, baby-totting human male roaming seedy streets might have been a rare sight on other worlds, but there were things far stranger on a Smuggler's Moon. Nar Shaddaa's avenues were choking with life-forms. Mynocks, long-eared Lepi, Dug strumpets, fluttering Baxthrax, spice-addicted glit-biters, spider-eyed Sipisk'ud mallards, frog-dogs and a hundred other unknown species competed with one another for space and air.

Luke measured the sights with quiet confusion.

But it was the *smell* from the teeming throngs that cut into Obi-Wan's spirit deepest. It wasn't so much the mixture of a

thousand alien odors, which he had become accustomed to after his many years living on Coruscant. It was the sheer pungency of desperation. The stench of poverty of will and diseasing imaginations. The pong of rotting morality.

Was it actually a smell? Or merely the translation of Nar Shaadda's depravity into the qualia of the Living Force?

Still physically and emotionally exhausted from his death duel with Anakin, Obi-Wan wasn't sure. And wasn't sure he cared.

Darth, Obi-Wan reminded himself. *Darth Vader*.

He and Luke had only a very short window. A search at the spaceport divulged that the next transport for Space Station Kwenn, an Outer Rim hub, was leaving in just four hours.

From there, they would be on their way to Tatooine.

Scanning the string of taverns along the main thoroughfare, Obi-Wan couldn't keep his mind from summoning happier times cantina-hopping with Anakin on Naos III. But there wasn't a moment to spare for an Ardees brew now ... and even less for a fond memory.

You failed the boy, Obi-Wan thought. *And you failed Qui-Gon*.

"You did *not* fail me," a deep paternal voice rebuked.

Obi-Wan instinctively spun around. The sound waves, unmistakable, reverberated in his ear clear as Kyber crystal.

But there was no Qui-Gon there.

Before parting ways, Yoda had revealed to Obi-Wan that his dead master, Qui-Gon Jinn, had found a way to *survive* in the netherworld of the Force by communing with mysterious beings known as the Whills. It was something Obi-Wan had suspected for some time, given his phantasmal encounters on Zonama Sekot and Mortis. Master Yoda said that his old

teacher would present himself when he felt Obi-Wan was ready to embark on this new stage of his Force training.

You are a much wiser man than I am, Qui-Gon once told him. *I foresee you will become a great Jedi Knight.*

Taking a deep breath, Obi-Wan focused into Luke's faultless countenance.

"I won't fail you," he promised.

"How much?"

A reedy voice, definitely *not* Qui-Gon's, interrupted Obi-Wan's reverie. The Jedi Master looked up.

...And up. A white serpent-necked insectoid with eight spindly legs, a prone and globular body, and glistening mandibles was staring down at both him and Luke. Its quadruple eyeballs blinked in a disconcerting sequence.

"Excuse me?" the Jedi said.

The sizable Rakaan, an andro judging by the pallid coloration, snaked zher chin around each nonexistent shoulder and pointed at Luke. "Peddling the cub, are you not? How much?"

"This one ... is not for sale."

"I give excellence flesh price per gram. *Excellence* price...."

Obi-Wan's gut twisted.

"I have no interest."

"I have offended?" the Rakaan reversed. "No, no. Superb *domicile*. I promise, *most* superb domicile for much *happiness* life." The insectoid's bloated gutsack writhed nauseatingly.

"I'll arrange for that myself."

"Three hundred credits?" zhe whispered, mandibles working one another like greedy hands.

"Thank you.... **No.**"

Obi-Wan's rejection passed from his lips like a sonic hammer slamming on anvilstone. The insectoid suddenly froze—as if straining to hear the Jedi Master's voice from a very long distance.

"You are a *stupid* human," zhe said finally. "There are *hundreds* cub-peddlers sell for less."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, staring hard at two of the lowlife's four eyeslits. "You will find these degenerates. And report them to the local authorities."

"I will find degenerates..." the Rakaan echoed hypnotically. "But there no are local authorities on Nar Shaddaa."

"A sympathetic bounty hunter, then."

The parasite nodded. "Sympathetic bounty h—"

"Move along."

The newly minted do-gooder scurried from sight.

Obi-Wan let out a ragged breath, its warmth striking Luke's face. The newborn fussed just so as the Jedi Master looked around, spying a cantina called "The Hoary Piffer." He was starting to think he should have that Ardees after all.

Or even a spice-laced Deltron wine.

Getting a hold of his senses, Obi-Wan decided to do the next best thing. He spotted a decrepit wretch of humanity sitting in a crumpled heap by the saloon entrance, like some tragic mascot for the establishment. The hag—practically hidden within her oversized moon-moth-eaten robe—seemed hard at work on some craft. Yet, sensing Obi-Wan's advance with a beggar's honed instincts, she extended a gnarled hand for alms.

Reaching into his robe pocket, he pulled out one of the untraceable Peggats with which Bail had supplied him.

Bending down carefully, so as not to jostle Luke, he dropped the currency into the ancient derelict's outstretched palm.

"Thank you!" she said. "*Thank* you, Jedi!"

Not even the cold of damnation could have chilled Obi-Wan's blood more quickly. "What did you call—"

"Jedi! *Jedi!* You are Jed—"

The fingers of Obi-Wan's free hand clamped to a point. The old woman's eyes went wide as her mouth locked shut.

Obi-Wan's heart was racing at lightspeed; the fetid stench from a nearby waste shaft—or this molding crone, he couldn't tell which—assailed his nostrils. Now it was he who hooked his chin, paranoid, over each shoulder. There was the Rakaan, exhorting a group of saucer-sombreroed Kyuzo toughs for help; inebriated Catuman warriors and Shistavanen Wolfwomen stumbling from the cantina, arm in arm; a group of buxom battle-axe-bearing Gamorrean sows, and a pair of Lagartoz War Dragons darting between skyhoppers high overhead. But none seemed to be paying him and the beggar any mind.

"You are mistaken," Obi-Wan said carefully, kneeling beside her. "I am not a Jedi," he said calmly. "The Jedi Knights are all dead."

Her eyes the size of Hutt dinner plates, the old woman nodded.

Obi-Wan couldn't remember the last time fear had coursed through his veins so uncontrollably. He released the woman from his Force grip.

The alms taker licked her shriveled lips. She held up a crooked yellow-nailed finger and bent it twice toward herself. Cautiously, Obi-Wan leaned closer.

"The Jedi are not dead," she whispered. "Old Vima *knows*. Before she was crazy, Vima-Da-Boda *was* a Jedi."

Boda? Obi-Wan knew—*had* known—a Jedi mystic named *Ashka* Boda. He had been one of Qui-Gon's closest confidants ... and, like Obi-Wan's master, had sought the secret path to immortality.

This woman looked to be *centuries* old....

Could it be? Could this pathetic life-form be ... a defender of the old Republic?

"Vima comes from a long line of Jedi warriors, young one. Feel the truth," her ancient lips urged. "Use the Force."

Nodding slowly, Obi-Wan did.

Extending wispy tendrils of perception, he searched dilapidated pathways of the mendicant's mind. Doorways that opened to nothingness or abandoned alcoves. But there was one room in the old woman's psyche, its shape the shape of melancholy, yet carefully cared for.

And suddenly ... he understood.

No, this withered creature wasn't a Jedi. The Force was now just a dim light in this frail vessel. But she *had* been one, long ago. Before—

"—Something *terrible* happened," the woman affirmed. "Jedi Vima trained her daughter, Neema, but *failed* her. Vima could not save little Neema from herself. From *love*. From the dark side...."

The centenarian trailed off. But Obi-Wan had gleaned from her thoughts the rest of the story. The room in the crone's mind suddenly expanded—an arena. Like Geonosis. And a young woman was chained helpless ... as two monsters lumbered into the sands.

"...From the jaws of the rancors," Obi-Wan's voice cracked.

She nodded slowly. "Neema's beloved ... fed her to them." The words were choked with anguish. As if needing

to be spoken for innumerable ages, but coming forth stillborn. "But the tragedy was double," she continued. "For little Neema *was with child*."

Obi-Wan shuddered, as the hulking monsters shared their meal between them. Recoiling from Vima's mind, he clutched Luke closer to him.

"Then," she said, "Jedi Vima gave into her anger. She *murdered* in hatred for her child, and her child's child. And Vima failed her Jedi vow ... and failed herself."

Failed.

The word squeezed Obi-Wan's heart like a vice.

I have failed you, Anakin. I have failed you....

Luke became restless in his embrace.

"Vima," the woman continued, "could not forgive herself." She raised a tremulous, arthritic hand to her head, as if to ward off the demon of memory, and it seemed to Obi-Wan she might fracture into a thousand pieces before his eyes.

"I'm sorry." Obi-Wan reached for her shaking hand. "I didn't know."

She grasped his palm with the fingers of both hands, looking with antiquated grief into his silver eyes. "Do not be sorry, Master. *Vima* is sorry. Vima was weak, and now ... cannot help you."

Help him? The thought had not even occurred to Obi-Wan.

But there it was: the selfless instincts of a Jedi, still yearning for life in this crippled matron.

But perhaps she still could.

"How long has it been since you parted from the Jedi?"

"Countless seasons, young Master. Countless seasons."

"And ... you've not run into others of our order?"

“Vima’s light is very small,” she replied. “It is Vima’s fault, but it is useful for hiding. This world of shadows *shrouds* her light. No one has noticed Old Vima here.”

Obi-Wan sighed, nodding. There had been little chance, but he had hoped—

“—but *Vima* has noticed *them!*” She cried. “A man and woman, like you, are *here*, on the Smuggler’s Moon.” She motioned Obi-Wan closer still. “*Jedi*,” she whispered.

Jedi.

A man and woman...

Masters Tholme and T’ra Saa!

It had to be.

Obi-Wan took in the disheveled, feeble woman now with a newfound respect, but wondered at the same time if he wasn’t bearing witness to his own fate.

This former Jedi knew something about hiding.

“How is it that you have managed to stay hidden this long?”

She sucked a haggard breath. “Vima’s light is very small,” she repeated. “In penance, Vima renounced the path of control ... like a true Jedi. Destiny cannot be controlled. So she surrendered *everything*—to the will of the Force.”

Obi-Wan found it hard advice to follow. At this moment, all that he *was* was an 80-kilogram mass of primitive, focused will with one directive: protect the tiny consciousness nuzzled in his arm at all cost.

“Your life will be hard, young Master. Like Vima’s. But you are not alone.” Her eyes fell on Luke. “The Force runs strong in this one....”

“Like his father,” Obi-Wan concurred.

She nodded. “Strong as a white current. Like his mother.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said, not entirely understanding. “Yes. Well, we must go.”

“Here! Here!” The fallen Jedi said, handing Obi-Wan the craft she had been painstakingly assembling. “This one is Vima’s finest.”

Obi-Wan took the object in his hands.

An oblong board, nearly the length of his arm, it was fashioned from multiple strips of woven boa-wood. Carved into one side appeared to be an ornate family crest: stylized flames surrounding two lightsabers, green and blue, crossed through a fiery sun out of which burst a warrioress riding a bearded grey beast.

Attached to the reverse side was a finely knit, miniature hammock, arrayed in bold red, green and purple patterns.

Luke appeared riveted by the colorful designs.

A cradleboard. As fine as any Obi-Wan had seen borne on the backs of Nelvaan’s doting mothers.

“But how—” Obi-Wan began.

Then he saw the name, stitched into the fabric in olden Ductavis calligraphy.

NEEMA

“Vima made this. *Again* and *again*. Countless seasons,” she confided. “For little Neema....”

The old woman trailed off again.

Obi-Wan imagined the tortured woman: knitting and unknitting. Day after day. Decade upon decade.

“Thank you,” he managed. “You have helped us more than you know. This will make our going easier.”

“Do you also need Vima’s weapon?”

Obi-Wan saw something cylindrical glint from the woman’s sleeve.

“I have my own.”

“For the boy.”

“He has one also.”

“You will need more ease on your journey, Master,” she said. “You are in great danger.”

“Yes, I know.” Obi-Wan considered the wild-eyed woman. He hesitated. “That is why I cannot take you with me.”

“Vima knows.... But Old Vima *will* keep your secret.”

For all their weariness, those sad ancient eyes bore unblinking into Obi-Wan.

Trust. It was a given among Jedi.

But Vima was no longer a Jedi.

Obi-Wan wasn’t even sure *he* was, anymore.

There was a Force power, known by a select few. A more ... *severe* version of the so-called Jedi mind trick. It allowed a Force-user to sieve a person’s mind—and then completely obliterate specific memories. One wrong move, however, and this identity-stealing ability could utterly hollow a victim’s mind. Leaving her....

Soulless.

Obi-Wan looked from newborn Luke to decrepit Vima.

The choice ... was no choice at all.

When he taught it to him, Qui-Gon had told Obi-Wan this memory-destroying power was an artifice of the dark side, for the midi-chlorians *never* failed to protest its use.

And yet, Qui-Gon had taught it to him anyway.

You are a much wiser man than I am.

For a moment such as this.

“The Force keeps no secrets,” Obi-Wan said finally.

The beggar’s head shook, a gesture somewhere between a convulsion and nod of resignation. Closing her eyes, she extended her head toward him, stretching her old neck forth

as one condemned. And Obi-Wan, like a psychic executioner, reached forward and into the broken woman's mind.

Sifting, sifting those decaying corridors for what he was looking for—

—and found—

The truth.

Vima's oath ... was more than just a promise. Keeping Obi-Wan's presence secret was a means to her redemption. She might not know anything about him or Luke except what each looked like—and given the cataracts clouding her eyes, even that was questionable. But Vima would die first before telling anyone what she'd seen or heard.

"You will keep our secret," Obi-Wan realized.

And, if necessary, she would die for it.

Vima did not bother looking up at him. Instead, she pointed at the cradleboard. Obi-Wan handed it to her to hold upright as he swaddled Luke in its mesh like an Alderaanian armor-caterpillar.

"The Force is strong with this one," Vima repeated.

"That is my hope."

Satisfied, Obi-Wan slipped the cradleboard with babe onto his back.

"You are his hold-father," she said. "Protect the boy. A great Master he will be. Vima knows."

Just then, the imprudent idea of an entirely different great—and small—Master riding on his back made Obi-Wan smile. He hoped Yoda had made it to the Dagobah system safely.

"If I find my friends," he promised, "I will ask them to come back for you."

Vima nodded, flicking her hand dismissively. "May the Force be with you, young ones."

Obi-Wan heard Luke coo in comfort.
“Yes,” the Jedi Master said. “It may.”

Chapter Five

It was approximately a forty-five-minute walk from The Hoary Piffer to the disreputable location the Pacithhip had specified. Obi-Wan found himself wishing he still had his varactyl steed, Boga. He'd never had a pet, never been one of those Force users with a special penchant for communing with animals. In the wake of his newfound solitude, this seemed all the more regrettable. Yet, he had shared that incalculable immediacy with Boga, that intimate feeling as if they were meant for each other. Her distinct sonic cry and plaintive death wail as she threw herself into blaster fire meant for him resounded in his memory still.

Was this what it was like—not being a Jedi?

Longing?

Lonely.

There were many reptiles on Tatooine: dragons, dewbacks, small desert lizards. He remembered this from his time guarding Padmé's ship on the planet and from a foray into Tusken territory ... all so long ago.

He promised himself he would seek one for a companion.

The byways leading up to Paolo's devolved into progressively deteriorated states of disrepair. Missing and fritzing street holosigns, blasted-out luma lights, walkways practically paved over with refuse ... the crumbling walls of habitations and storefronts stylized in script from a score of enemy gangland tongues.

HONOGA STREET GANKKILLERS

JEDIS ROT IN BOBOQUEEQUEE

empire or republic—

makes no difference

the evocii LIVE!!!

Obi-Wan used the Force to buffer Luke from most of the tumultuous noise: the cursing of transients, random blaster reports and residence alarms. But he did not attempt to shield the boy's eyes. Between suppings of Krayt milk, the newborn observed the slums with an austerity to rival any Jedi ... before falling asleep in boredom.

During his waking state, Luke's unripened mind felt to Obi-Wan like fragile Vors-glass in the Force. But in slumber, the boy's brain activity was like a small supernova of luminosity. Dreams, Master Yoda had once intimated, were a transconscious gateway to the Unifying Force. Obi-Wan sent soothing thoughts to the babe through this supercharged medium.

You are the first of the new Jedi, Luke.

But oddly, as he waded into the infant's mind, something reciprocal occurred. Obi-Wan felt the Force flow from the child, like an eddy into the sea of the Jedi Master's power. And not just flow, but flow *differently*.

The boy ... the boy was like a conduit to an aspect of the Force foreign to Obi-Wan. Indeed, a "white current" such as Vima had named. He felt his mind, spirit and body as one with the infant, a tranquil stream insisting on washing over him. Obi-Wan could feel his own features lose distinctness, his face *reforming* into another ... someone unrecognizable.

It was a Force illusion he could sustain only for a moment. But it was as if Luke's unconscious were attempting to realize Obi-Wan's desire to travel unseen. And it was like nothing Obi-Wan had ever felt before.

Old Vima was right. The Force *was* strong in this one.

At last, the Jedi Master found Paolo's place—a corner establishment, fenced off by a laughably ineffective rampart made from rickety sheets of durasteel. Pushing open the rusted front gate, Obi-Wan entered.

Within, he immediately caught sight of the small garage space, certainly a front, and one of the mechanics torso deep in a cross-shaped Dianoga starfighter. Startled, the russet alien looked up, its face and tan coveralls smeared with grease and dripping up to its elbows with violet lubricant. But it was that desiccated face, the angrily angled eyebrows flaring into broad, triangular earflaps, and the pair of tusks jutting downward from leathery cheeks that gave Obi-Wan pause.

Though he'd never seen one unmasked, or even entirely "in the flesh," as it were, he recognized the species instantly from the Jedi Temple archives. A Kaleesh. The same species as General Grievous. At least, before he became a robotic abomination.

And a corpse.

“This ought to go well...” he said, perhaps to Luke—who, perhaps still asleep, didn’t deign to respond. Obi-Wan called out. “Paolo?”

The Kaleesh ceased working completely, beetling its eyebrows into an even uglier gaze of scrutiny. Then, with oversized hydrospanner in hand, the alien ominously approached. Obi-Wan took an involuntary step back as the frightful machinist loped toward him—on those odd-jointed legs—not saying a word. The sinewy muscles within its auburn flesh, lacquered with engine oils, were taut. Nearing within centimeters, its unwelcoming eyes dissected the Jedi hood to boots and back up again.

Obi-Wan met the dead stare of those menacing slit-pupils as that familiar alien glower bore into him—and recalled the screeching flames from Grievous’ eye sockets when he exploded the cyborg’s life-sustaining innards. Then, never breaking eye contact, and in that special Kaleesh fashion of greeting strangers, the humanoid’s almost-absent nose shriveled carefully, twice sniffing the Jedi, like an alpha gundark. Obi-Wan felt his skin constricting, his nerve endings firing violently, as the Kaleesh neared sleeping Luke....

“Yes?” Obi-Wan said, his sleeved lightsaber slipping slowly into his hand.

Then, without speaking, the bat-faced Kaleesh abruptly broke away and loped back toward the garage.

“Hey!” Obi-Wan yelled after him. But the alien disappeared.

Was that it, then? One wrong whiff and the deal was off?

Obi-Wan listened to the menacing sounds of the squalid neighborhood, strategizing his next move. He could sense

Luke's awareness cresting out of sleep when, finally, a new alien emerged from the garage.

Looking even greasier in her coveralls than the Kaleesh, and as archaic as Old Vima, the humanoid was favored with an elongated cranium, bulging yellow eyes, and a wine-colored face wrinkled like she had spent far, *far* too much time in a Hutt hot tub. She resembled a leather-skinned Weequay ... except with hypothyroidism and a monstrous brain tumor.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Obi-Wan muttered.

Luke, now evidently awake, sneezed in reply.

"Zegundis," the prune-face said.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said.

"That's my bloodname, flat-flesh. Not a blessing."

"My apologies. Are you Paolo, or was that the Kaleesh?"

"Paolo's been dead since I was a youngling—and Ishtah works for me." The wrinkle-faced woman rubbed her filthy hands together with a fermenting degreaser, and blue residue dripped from her furrowed fingers. "What's your business, stranger?"

"The name's Ben. And I believe you know. Shnozitski sent me."

"What're the specs?"

"Belbullab twenty-two, flawless working order, fully armed. And then some. Since our mutual acquaintance has certainly transmitted to you holos of the ship's every angle and carbon score, you no doubt know that already, also."

"Shnoz told me her name, too. I guess you think you're a funny human, Ben. But she looks good, I'll give you that. Why do you want to dump her?"

“She’s not the kind of spitfire appropriate to a man of my age and responsibilities anymore.” Obi-Wan turned to give the mechanic a side view of the infant affixed to his back.

“Neema, is it?” Zegundis nodded. “If you were smart, you’d ditch the kid and keep the ship.”

Obi-Wan gave her a tight smile. “Thankfully, I’m more weak-minded than most.”

The prune-face smiled back. “I’ll bet. I’ll tell you what. The truth is, my Kaleesh doesn’t like the smell of you, flat-flesh. That means I don’t like you, either. But I like your ship. How about a trade? So happens my associate Bammy just got a hold of a stellar YT-1300. She’s in orbit now, but it’ll just take a handful of days to make her space-worthy.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have that much time.”

Zegundis paused as if to think, but Obi-Wan knew better.

“Okay. I’ll take the Belbullab off your hands,” she said. “Deed?”

“You’ll have to forge one yourself.”

“That’ll cost you. Alright, fifty-thousand. No questions asked.”

And now the real bargaining began.

“Mistress Zegundis,” Obi-Wan parried. “We each know she’s worth well more than that.”

“*Master* Flat-flesh,” the prune-face retorted, enunciating the slur with saccharine tenderness. “If she was, you wouldn’t be trying to pawn her off on some brainless bishwag on Nar Shaddaa, now would you?”

So the humanoid wasn’t as brain damaged as she looked.

Obi-Wan considered using a touch of the Force to massage her disposition. But he wasn’t here to cheat a business owner out of her livelihood—illegitimate though it

may be. He was here to ditch his attention-grabbing transport.

And to secure a small sum minimizing the burden thrust on Luke's new aunt and uncle. Time to find out how much Zegundis really *could* offer. They didn't call Obi-Wan "The Negotiator" for nothing.

"One hundred."

"Thousand? You're dreaming," she growled.

"Ninety."

"Delirious."

"Maybe. But as you can see, I have an infant to feed—"

"You can feed *that* bantha fodder to the tourists, Gactimus."

"Eighty-five," Obi-Wan countered.

A look halfway between insult and incredulity contorted Zegundis' mummied face. "What is this, amateur night, humor man? Fifty-five."

"Mistress Zegundis, you're more miserly than a Jedi mendicant."

Zegundis' lip twitched, a gesture almost invisible in her wrinkled features. "That wouldn't be so bad, except for the new Empire's 'most wanted' holo-prints."

"Wanted?"

"Emperor Palpatine's 'Enemy of the Empire' list, just released," she said slowly. "Mostly Jedi Knights suspected of surviving his kill order—Master Flat-flesh."

Emperor.

Even as the Imperial title sent a chill down Obi-Wan's spine, as he recalled that he and Anakin had actually *saved* Palpatine from the burning wreck of Grievous' flagship, he had less than a split-second to process all this and react. The news about an Enemy of the Empire list was almost certainly

true. Meanwhile, Zegundis' address of Obi-Wan as "Master" was more than likely merely a coincidence. A circumstantial joke.

Or a stab in the dark. A veiled threat.

But, like any good negotiator ... Obi-Wan had to assume it to be all these things.

Luke burped.

"Little Neema," Obi-Wan said guardedly, "concedes you drive a hard bargain." He looked the prune-face square in her bulging eye. "Seventy-five."

"Sixty. Take it or leave it."

"We'll accept—"

"Gonzo."

"—sixty-five."

Zegundis paused a moment, crossing her arms—then heaved a vanquished sigh.

"Sixty-five," she agreed, slapping her dirty hand into Obi-Wan's palm. "I don't carry Republic credits. Will a cred voucher be alright?"

"Has that ploy ever worked on anybody?"

"There's a Gungan born every minute," Zegundis assured him. "Aurodium or crystalline vertex, then?"

"Aurodium will do fine."

He presented a pouch from his utility belt for her to spill the scintillating currency into. As she finished, Obi-Wan observed the changing colors of the approaching dusk with a deep and sudden sadness.

"Thank you, Mistress Zegundis," he said. "But there is one final condition to our agreement."

The proprietor crossed her arms again. "And what might that be, Ben?"

The Jedi Master steeled himself and sucked air sharply.

In a flash, he lunged.

His hand moved faster than her sickly eyes could follow, seizing her tumorous head ... and stabbing the Force into the sensitive repository of her mind. Obi-Wan thought he heard distant voices protest in horror—maybe it was only Luke’s. But nothing could deter him from his responsibility. Not even as he felt Zegundis’ memory centers unspooling into oblivion.

I’m sorry, he whispered.

Chapter Six

The planet Nal Hutta loomed, bloated as its wormish namesake, glowing in the Nar Shaddaan dusk sky.

The ingots of aurodium jingled in Obi-Wan's belt pouch as he left Zegundis' garage.

Obi-Wan deplored the idea of handing over such an exotic piece of military hardware to the criminal underworld. That wasn't the cause of the lingering revulsion in the pit of his stomach, though.

He'd done what he had to back there. For Luke's sake.

But the boy had gone unnaturally quiet since.

Still, if what Zegundis said about Palpatine's Jedi hit list was true, there was no telling when or whence a bounty hunter might spring.

So this was Obi-Wan's new reality. An outlaw.

Forever.

Not forever, he told himself. *Only until the Republic can be restored.*

Or he found himself on the wrong end of a bounty hunter's blaster rifle.

There was no more time to search for Tholme and T'ra Saa. They might even already be captured.

Or executed.

Obi-Wan felt a flicker on his cheek. He looked up at the blackening sky and felt another.

The next transport to Kwenn Space Station would be departing soon. Obi-Wan quickened his pace as the pattering rain came down harder, taking the dimly lit back alleys to avoid any curious eyes scrutinizing the congested thoroughfares.

That was his first mistake.

As Obi-Wan came to the cross of a lonely intersection, he heard the blood-curdling squeal behind him—a primordially distressing, inhuman skreel. Luke jumped in fright in his wrap, and the Jedi Master spun around. That was his second mistake.

There they were: the trio of obese Gamorrean sows he'd seen earlier, their jaws dribbling spittle onto swollen breasts, mixed indiscriminately with the mucus seeping from their porcine snouts. Their axes slapped happily into meaty green mitts.

But the confirmation of Obi-Wan's second error came in the *next* sound he heard. An eerie whirr like a giant-mandibled skeeto cutting hell through the air.

The outlaw Jedi ducked just in time to see the black, razor-brimmed sombrero slice through the space his neck had occupied—and barely sprang away to deny a similar murderous discus from subtracting his knees from his shins. Fiber-chains linked to each of the lethal fashion statements whipped the razorhats back to their owners like Thorgeld spool-toys.

Obi-Wan now turned to his *left*.

What he saw there were the *same* three Kyuzo toughs that he'd also seen in the vicinity of the cantinas. Muttering in their metal-weave vernacular, they escorted a trio of grotesque frog-dogs. The humongous wart-covered beasts strained against yellow laser-leashes, gnashing their splinter teeth and wagging fat tadpole tails in hunger. Though supposedly sentient, this disease-bearing litter frothed pink from their mouths with Cyborrean rabies.

Obi-Wan immediately took stock. He had encountered Kyuzos before: startlingly agile martial artists, a group such as this was a match for any two Jedi. But *these* particular wiry-muscled specimens were undoubtedly *go-zeki*. Though wearing the species' prototypical oxygen masks and skirts, the flesh of these bare-chested brutes was not olive but charred orange: the remnant of a sadistic initiation process that was a testament, along with their fiber-chained razorhats, of their nefarious allegiance.

Kyuzo *go-zeki* were gangsters and honor fanatical.

And extra deadly for it.

Meanwhile, their two-legged amphibianoids appeared only slightly less ravenous than the drooling Gamorrean ogresses in the alley to Obi-Wan's right.

Three *go-zeki* Kyuzos. Three ferocious frog-dogs. A trio of bloodthirsty Gamorrean berserkers.

He cursed that old fossil Vima-Da-Boda, certain she had betrayed them after all.

Still, Obi-Wan didn't think the odds against him and Luke insurmountable.

Those were his *third* and *fourth* mistakes.

Because what he *didn't* see—what only Luke's crystal-pure gaze could see—were the Chiggnash.

Obi-Wan didn't even *sense* the two arachnoids in time. What he did was *hear* them ... or at least, the obscene internal ratcheting from their rifles like a nexu grinding its fangs. *KrrrrRAK!* A flotilla of otherwise-invisible waves warped the falling rain into a geometric hysteria as Obi-Wan whirled just in time to jerk Luke out of harm's way. Raising his hand to choke out the blasts zeroed on his back, he held his open Force-infused palm steadfast, like the incontestable decree of an all-powerful deity.

And it was nearly *obliterated*.

A warhead of pain detonated in the Jedi's mind. The tissues of his hand screamed as if muscle maggots were devouring it inside out.

Portions of Obi-Wan's stricken hand aged almost instantaneously, livering before his eyes, the creeping necrosis tempered only by the inadequate swath of Force energy he'd summoned.

There were only a handful of handheld weapons effective against Jedi—most illegal. And Obi-Wan knew them all.

Verpine shatter guns. Pulse-wavers. Geonosian sonic blasters. Flechette launchers. Disruptors. And....

Squib tensor rifles.

The realization struck him like a trisyllabic profanity:

Shnozitski.

Imaginatively fiendish for invention by so farcical a species as Squibs, tensor firepower *devastated* a target's cellular structure with compressed-wave technology adapted from tractor beam physics, churning molecular structures into mush. Though challenging to aim, the weapons' rippling, imperceptible discharge also benefited by being all but impossible to wholly deflect with either lightsaber or an unfocused Jedi mind.

Instinctively snatching back his ravaged hand, Obi-Wan backed against a building, shielding Luke between himself and the cheap stresscrete wall.

And at last, the Jedi Master understood his *final* mistake.

Never, *never* trust a deal struck on Nar Shaddaa.

Acid-yellow and with a multi-segmented carapace, the Chiggnash reared on a quartet of spiking hind legs, totaling just under half of their myriad specialized appendages. Jutting from their long torsos were a pair of thicker arms that seemed to double for ambulation, pinching together as if inviting an insectile cuddle, while a more dexterous set of pincers, clinching the tensor rifles, abutted those. Topping them all were two cudgel-like claws extending on chunky forearms, set just below squashed triangular heads lacking any discernible eyes. Brown spots dotted the carapace of one while two bandoleers crisscrossed the thorax of the other.

Yet the most sinister anatomical detail of the scorpionic thugs were their deadly, meter-long stingers. The Chiggnash's

wickedly skinny harpoon tails coiled and uncoiled as Crisscross's voice seesawed in a crickety twang.

"Hand over the credits, outlander."

"I'm afraid—" Obi-Wan gritted through the throbbing pain. "—I don't know what you're talking about."

"The payment you just received for your ship, void-brain."

As if to emphasize the point, the Kyuzos' gluttonous frog-dogs barked feral croaks of reproach.

"I'm sure," Obi-Wan insisted, "we can come to a mutually beneficial—"

"Observe all around you, dungcreeper," Spots retorted, motioning to their *go-zeki* and Gamorrean minions. "We've *already* worked it out."

Obi-Wan *did* sweep his gaze around him, knowing well the Chiggnash's despicable arts.

Professional kidnappers and blackmailers by trade, they were also natural, fly-by-night enslavers. Impaling their stingers into would-be conscripts, the arachnoids injected their prey with a zombifying serum that blended into blood streams, rendering even alien physiologies forfeit to the Chiggnash Control Mind. While xenobiologists hypothesized a pheromone bedrock for what came next, what was indisputable was the bone-chilling effect. The mind-frappéed fools became the warrior drones of their attackers.

For six standard days, that is. If the venom in the victims' systems wasn't counteracted by then, they soon succumbed to a permanent vegetative state. By the glimmer of flickering street lumas, Obi-Wan registered each group of heavily armed and puppeted brigands surrounding Luke and him both. He listened to the concerto of satisfied Gamorrean chortles; the

panting and slurping of carnivore amphiboids; the tin echo of raindrops on Kyuzo headwear.

Beyond the din of the downpour ... he perceived Luke acutely awake, however soundless; sensed the slowing of his own heart. Somewhere distant ... someone was playing *Bleed My Nova's* dulcet notes on a Zelosian grass fife.

And nearby ... the constant furling/unfurling of the Chiggnash's poison organs.

The rainstorm now hammered them, as Obi-Wan cradled his pulse-smashed hand ... and let his lightsaber slip into his blighted palm.

"Not," he whispered, "from my point of view."

Not a Jedi finger, not an infant eyelash—not a canine tail, swine snout or Kyuzo muscle quivered.

"*Go-zeki...*" the Chiggnash leader clicked at last. "Feed the dogs."

The Kyuzos smiled their molten eyes.

And they unleashed the hounds.

Snarling, the one-hundred-kilogram, yawping juggernauts bounded—bulbous-eyed, splashing madness, laser-leashes thrashing.

Neither the Jedi Master nor his Padawan even twitched.

There there, Luke.... The frog-dogs leapt ... tongues lolling in gaping maws.

A shaft of light ... *exhaled*.

The living radiance harpooned the first slathering meat-eater through the chest—virtually splitting it in halves as Obi-Wan yanked up the shaft of light and slinged it sideways through the greedy, spiked jaws of the second frog-dog, severing upper skull and maxilla. His right hand nestled effortlessly into the cup of his left as he intercepted the glowing energy and fulfilled its figure-eight orbit with a

delicate sliver that only just licked the fleshy belly of the third frog-dog to unzip the beast's innards from purge-hole to nostrils.

"*Gorple zo-zo!*" A Kyuzo cried.

The breathing light ... *sighed*.

The weltering canine cadavers lay steaming in a wet, burbling mass at Obi-Wan's feet, his lightsaber sizzling. Never once exposing his back or Padawan to their adversaries.

The Chiggnash mindbenders' nothing faces disclosed not a hint of concern.

"*Big* mistake, witchyman," Crisscross admon-ished. "Before, Riley and I only wanted your credits. But the Empire is paying premium for Jed-heads. Bodies optional."

Lightning split the heavens and thunder crack-rolled through the alleyway as, slowly, exquisitely deliberately, Obi-Wan nodded. His hair rain-matted, lightsaber arrowed in both hands ... the Jedi Master took his stance.

"Then," he said, "come take it, venomous gutter-scum."

And as the Kyuzo *go-zeki* stalked forward ... as the Gamorrean berserkers shrilled a war cry to their porker deities ... and the Chiggnash ratcheted their tensor rifles—something *beautiful* happened.

The most sublime sound Obi-Wan could hope to hear in that hopeless moment found his Jedi ears.

The sound of another lightsaber igniting.

And *another*.

And Obi-Wan realized ... Vima had been right, all along.

The Jedi he was looking for had found *him*.

The two cloaked rescuers blitzed into the fray, mists of movement in the torrential rain. With uncanny Jedi reflexes, the lither of their saviors flipped directly into the Chiggnash's

line of tensor fire and, spinning her evergreen plasma blade like the hour hand of a chronometer, elegantly severed their trigger-happy manipulators at the wrists. But even as the extortionists' rifles slapped to the wet ferrocrete, pincers still attached, the unflappable Chiggnash jammed their heads into their thoraxes and dropped onto their abdomens. Their foreclaws and venomous insectoid tails lashed out with explosive strikes, forcing the nimble guardian to evade with every trace of her agility. In reaction, the Kyuzo and Gamorrean warrior drones instantly attacked.

Except instantly just wasn't nearly instantaneous enough.

The Kyuzo bandidos flung their malicious fiber-chained razorhats—just as, from behind, the emerald lightsaber of the larger Jedi swordsman melted through the mercenaries' lower legs like a cleaver through reek meat. In one clean, precise stroke, the *go-zeki* amputees *literally* fell to their knees, their flying, blade-brimmed headgear ricocheting wildly off the adjacent buildings.

The Gamorrean pig-women charged.

Frightening bulks of jostling, caroming muscle and fat hurtled headlong toward Obi-Wan and Luke.

And the Jedi Master fully obliged them.

As the crazed sows bore down on him, vibro-axes raised, Obi-Wan reached out with the fingers of his uninjured hand. Then, as if seizing a ruffian by the lapels, *wrenched* his closed fist back toward him.

The sows, already stampeding at full tilt, didn't stand a chance.

With their inertia abruptly magnified tenfold by the Force, the rain-slicked ground finished the rest. The sopping, out-of-control enforcers could only watch stupefied as Obi-Wan somersaulted himself and Luke up over their heads and

out of their barreling path as the sows plowed into and *through* the stresscrete wall.

A moment elapsed. Then, the three Gamorreans stumbled clumsily out from the imploded wreckage, grunting woefully and holding their horned heads and sides. Proving Chiggnash pheromones no match for porcine self-preservation, when the Gamorreans caught sight of Obi-Wan again, lightsaber ablaze, the guardswomen ran for their miserable, piggy lives.

Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief.

And in that brief respite ... he realized something was wrong.

Luke was crying.

Not just crying. The babe seemed *panicked*. That special kind of intangible infant terror.

And all at once, as the cloaked woman screamed savage slashes of her lightsaber through the tails of the Chiggnash arachnoids ... as the other cloaked “savior” spiked a lightsaber double-handed through the mutilated and pleading Kyuzos’ heads, Obi-Wan understood something was *gravely* wrong.

These were *not* the Jedi he was looking for.

Not Masters Tholme and T’ra Saa, he realized, suddenly recalling that, long, long ago ... there had been a *Sith* academy on Nar Shaddaa.

No. These were....

“*Dark Jedi*,” he spat. It was the last thought he had as the maimed Chiggnash begged for mercy—and were privileged none.

The cloaked woman, the woman he had taken for T’ra Saa, seared her lightsaber through the torsos of the disarmed arachnoids—leaving all six segments of the scorpion-like

beings flopping and squirming unto stillness—as her bloodlusting companion hurled his laser sword end over end at the hides of the fleeing Gamorreans.

A twinge of hesitation came over Obi-Wan. But the Jedi Master struck out with the Force, more out of instinct than pity, and arrested the slinging blade midflight. The stalled lightsaber splashed into a puddle, convulsing helpless and shorting out, as the sows escaped.

“*Enough.*” He yelled through the pounding storm. “*Who* are you?”

The waterlogged lightsaber trembled, spinning back into the large swordsman’s gloved grip. Then Obi-Wan and Luke’s hooded rescuers pulled back their cowls.

The larger one, the one he’d taken for Master Tholme, was completely unfamiliar; but his dark hair, cultish facial markings and pigmentation were not. White as ash, with a series of black vector tattoos adorning his forehead and cheeks, his visage resembled that of Dathomir’s witches or a ghost of Darth Maul. The patterning marked him as a Bpfasshi ... centuries-old enemies of the Jedi Knights and a member of the darksider insurgents that recently rampaged across the Sluis Sector.

Home to the Dagobah system.

Where Master Yoda is headed....

“*You.*” Obi-Wan said. “I thought the last of you assassins took your own lives in disgrace.”

“What wounds one can survive, Jedi dog,” the cultist replied. “When the hatred is strong enough.”

Obi-Wan cut his eyes to the man’s accomplice. For while the Bpfasshi was a stranger to him, the young woman, a striking blond human....

“I *know* you,” Obi-Wan said.

“You do not,” she corrected him. “But I know *you*, murderer.”

Murderer?

Obi-Wan’s mind raced, trying to match the face of this woman—this *girl*—to an event, a place, anything. To no avail.

Buying time, he demanded, “How did you find me?”

The Bpfasshi sneered. “Mostly luck.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Then believe in *destiny*, you damned fool!” The blond woman closed on Obi-Wan, her green lightsaber brushing his. “Fomadu tracked down your fellow hypocrites, T’ra Saa and Tholme, to *kill* them for their role in slaughtering the Bpfasshi.”

“Little did we imagine the Jedis’ own government would do our work for us,” Fomadu gloated. “Tell us, Kenobi,” the girl said. “How does it feel to have *your* kin justly massacred?”

The words kicked Obi-Wan in the throat like a bucking ronto.

From my point of view, Anakin’s words echoed, the Jedi are evil!

“*Where* are Masters Tholme and T’ra Saa!” he demanded.

“Worry about yourself, vile Jedi,” said the blonde.

The menacing purr of Fomadu’s lightsaber reactivated anew as he advanced.

Obi-Wan knew the Bpfasshi were mavens of mind tricks. Even now, he could feel Fomadu battering his defenses, seizing on his momentary weakness. The torrents of rain before him warped into images of his Jedi brethren. Initially, T’ra Saa and Tholme in anguish—then, more profoundly, Yoda, Siri and Anakin, bellowing in their death throes....

Soaked, frightened, exhausted, Luke had not stopped screaming.

Obi-Wan fought off the hallucinations.

“And you?” he pressed the blond woman. “You’re not Bpfasshi. Are you here merely to indulge your boyfriend’s bloodlust?”

The young human’s cheeks flared. “We do our master’s bidding, Jedi. But he must’ve sensed *you* would be here, too.” Obi-Wan was adroitly keeping both Dark Jedi in front of him. The hilt of the human’s lightsaber seemed to him distinctive: a vibrant gold, like the color of her hair.

“I *know* your master,” he declared.

Tornados of anger welled in the girl’s vibrant auburn eyes.

“Who my master is *now* doesn’t concern you, save how he shares my hatred for old wounds you inflicted. What should concern you is who my master *was*—until you *executed* him.”

Obi-Wan’s mind quietly unknotted.

So. This wasn’t about the Emperor’s Jedi hit list at all.

No. This was deathly personal.

Not long ago, but before Nelvaan ... he and two other Jedi Knights had chased down a group of Sith acolytes, calling themselves the Jensaarai, to the planet Susevfi—

Where, in battle, Obi-Wan lost the Tatooine-woven birthday cloak Anakin had given him.

Known conspirators with the Bpfasshi, the three Sith practitioners were vanquished, but Jedi Master Nejaa Halcyon had given his life to assure it. The Jensaarai had been so saturated with malignant energies, their flesh had exploded with polluted anima upon death like pus suppurating from a festered wound.

The leader of the darksider band, the one Obi-Wan had dispatched, had been a handsome, blond man....

“Your master—”

“My *father!*” She snarled. “*Murderer!*”

Luke was bawling uncontrollably.

And at that moment, an unwelcome thought occurred to Obi-Wan, last of the Jedi.

How many?

Gangsters, bounty hunters, darksiders—his own apprentice. Obi-Wan had ended the lives of these and more. Only necessarily, to be sure. But necessity was an *absolute*. *A point of view*. None had shared Obi-Wan’s Jedi strictures on emotional attachments.

On families.

Over almost four decades as an avowed protector of peace and justice for the Republic ... just how many sons and daughters had Obi-Wan orphaned?

Hallucinations continued invading the edges of his eyes and mind—Qui-Gon, Satine, Halagad, Ahsoka—as Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber.

“What is your name?” his voice cut through the rain.

For a fraction of a second, the girl hesitated ... the storm in her eyes calming.

“Do *not*—” the Bpfasshi began.

“Mei,” she answered, her lightsaber steady.

“Mei,” Obi-Wan said. “I’m sorry about your father. If there had been some other way—”

“Silence this pleading Jedi butcher already!” Fomadu interrupted. “He lies like a dung-filled Sloogarian!”

“Listen to me, Mei. I *am* sorry about your father. But the Jensaarai were misled, following a corrupt fusion of Jedi and Sith teachings—”

And in that utterance, the storm in her eye swelled into a hurricane.

“Chaos *take* the Jensaarail! *And Chaos take you!*” Mei erupted. “Fomadu and I follow a *new* way! No Jedi and Sith. No light or dark. Just the *truth* of this instant of life.”

“And upon ending your life,” Fomadu taunted, “we will suckle your youngling on the teat of that truth ... which the babe will recognize or be destroyed.”

It was only then that the Jedi Master understood why Luke was crying uncontrollably.

The illusions besieging *Obi-Wan* were not the Bpfasshi’s only assault. Fomadu’s onslaught of terror phantasms were *also* preying upon the boy’s fragile mind.

Obi-Wan’s gaze hardened into steel.

“No,” he growled. “I don’t think so.”

Then suddenly Luke’s panic subsided.

And Obi-Wan—

Ran.

Chapter Seven

A bloodwolf is an extraordinary creature.

Native to the planet Rena's arrestingly misshapen Accursed Kings mountain range and revered by the indigenous Pipunt people, the "Great Beast Prince" measures a meter tall at the shoulder. Contrary to common belief, the bloodwolf does not pine for the vital serum of its prey, as does the bloodsniffer or Oskan blood eater. His diet, rather, consists primarily in the monotonous consumption of spiny hordzats and the occasional pack-slaughter of a bantha. The name of this magnificent predator in truth arises from the enamel blush of his massive crimson, iron-saturated fangs,

which contrast strikingly with the silvery density of his princely coat.

But make no mistake.

Though the majestic bloodwolf derives his name from his dentition, the brood-fathers of this noble breed have proven spectacularly ruthless protectors of their packs. Rena's winegrowers and backwoods Irongut distillers, alike, attest that these sires will fight Pipunt hunters (or courage-stricken inebriates) fang-and-claw to the death to safeguard their own. These exquisite animals will maim, will kill, *will die*—for the lives of their kin.

For their offspring.

Their *blood*. The “Wise Prince,” the Pipunt diviners proclaim, among all animals (the stars included) *alone* comprehends death. A bloodwolf, they say, skirting the line between the curse of consciousness and the bliss of unsentience, is fearless. For he spent his youngest days in the very mandibles of death, spirited from jeopardy in the yawn of brood-father's scarlet jaws.

There, countless cubs meet their demise. Many more will yet.

The bloodwolf *alone* comprehends death.

And, therefore, the sweet pungency of life ... howling his mournful wisdom, into the im-measurable night, to his estranged brethren the stars.

A bloodwolf *is* fearless. And though the Wise Prince will fight fang-and-claw to the death, maim and kill—

He also runs.

At a dead sprint, a bloodwolf, cub in jaws, can achieve velocities of eighty kilometers per hour.

On the Smuggler's Moon, a Jedi Master with his newborn Padawan ran faster.

Nar Shaddaa itself, circling the massive jewel of Nal Hutta, spins on its axis at a respectable *one hundred and seventy* kilometers per hour....

Obi-Wan Kenobi—ran faster.

And on a sand-lacerated mesa, a podracer utterly butchers distances at *six hundred kilometers per hour*.

Obi-Wan—

Ran—

Faster.

The Jedi Master ran over one hundred and sixty-five meters *per second*.

More than six hundred kilometers per hour.

No one, not Jedi, not Sith, had ever duplicated such superhuman locomotion.

Was Obi-Wan flying? He didn't know.

But he knew that, *this time*, he was *not* running from the blaster fire of destroyer droids. He was *not* running to save his *own* life.

He was not even running to save Qui-Gon from the slaying fire of Darth Maul's singing blade.

He was running ... to save the child he loved.

To call him a blur, a smear of speed, was to substitute poor poetry in favor of truth.

Space contracted—time distended.

Obi-Wan was a fulmination on reality.

Obi-Wan *was* Truth.

Obi-Wan literally blazed with kinetic light as he blistered through the Nar Shaddaan streets. And with every impossible angle he cornered, every slow-moving raindrop he dodged, every being he spared spontaneous combustion from contact with his supernatural momentum, the Jedi Master felt his

muscles, his atoms, his very *essence* ... rebelling into pandemonium.

Obi-Wan was—factually—flying apart.

Luke, for his part, seemed to be enjoying the ride.

Obi-Wan knew the Dark Jedi couldn't be far behind. He did not look back to see if they were gaining. Physics, if not the Force, forbade it. Maybe he had taken them by surprise, and maybe they couldn't match pace with a Jedi Master devouring the fuel of desperation, but he couldn't keep this clip up forever. Even much longer.

But Nar Shaddaa hid in its bowels a putrid truth.

The undercity.

Obi-Wan needed a fighting chance. Sith duos were *not* his forte, especially not when he was protecting the last hope of the Jedi. Leaving evening pedestrians replete with awe as he ripped through the night at inconceivable velocities, Obi-Wan spirited Luke from danger—searching—*praying*—

Then, Obi-Wan's eyes flashed upon it.

A waste shaft dropping down into Nar Shaddaa's rotting belly.

Out of nowhere, a searing splint of emerald sickled toward Obi-Wan. Without thinking, the Jedi arched away, all that kept his head from being lopped off as the lightsaber instead singed the scraggles of his beard. The uncontrolled shift sent the Jedi Master careening, nearly splattering him and Luke both into a high rise.

Not knowing how deep the waste shaft descended, Obi-Wan didn't think twice. With a deep inhalation of the odorous decay wafting up from the undercity, and an entreaty to the Force, he speared down the ingress with Luke ... plunging into perdition.

Chapter Eight

As one entity, the Dark Jedi tore through the city after their prey.

Mei knew what Fomadu was thinking. *Of course* she did. When she saved him from committing suicide in the wake of his brother Zukao's death, he had transferred the Force-bond he shared with his Bpfasshi sibling to her, commingling their spirits at the roots. What Fomadu felt, now *Mei* felt; what Fomadu thought, she *knew*. Shared at the synaptic level were their every ecstasy and pain and every phantom state between.

But when Mei had shuttered their ardent bond for a split instant, succumbing to Obi-Wan Kenobi's manipulative Jedi tricks, she had allowed the coward to escape.

It would not happen again.

{{*I told you not to tell him your name,*}}

 Fomadu thought, scolding her.

{{*Shut up, my love,*}}

 she explained.

She and Fomadu had devoted their lives not just to each other, but the path of *Chaos*—that Ur-dream before and beyond all things in which the sum of realities interbreed. The Dark in which all originated and would return.

The Great Void, they understood, was the only truth. Their necromancing master had taught them that. It was the *emptiness* Mei knew when Kenobi took her father Sukarr's life. And it was that same unbeing, *within* her, that had led her to Fomadu's, conjoining them on Malo VI like two perfect black holes sucking at one another's abyss.

Fomadu had given her *purpose*, and their cyborg master had given them *hope* ... forged in the sanctifying chrism of blood and vengeance.

It was Darkness, yes, but not death they worshipped. *Revenge* was her lifeblood now. Even so, all these facets—the Dark, Chaos, the Great Void and even elemental vengeance—were mere viewports, expressions as superficial as coordinates on a map. Sensual metaphors for the one true and unintelligible Ur-dream.

Since It and Until Then, there was only the eternal moment.

And each other.

The destruction of the Jedi Order by Imperial decree had been the first momentous sign of Chaos favoring Ur-dreamers commitment. And now, Kenobi's death was about

to become the perfect consummation of their annihilative love.

{{*We won't be forgiven if he escapes,*}}

 Fomadu cautioned.

Mei's response was cold certainty.

{{*He won't escape.*}}

Kenobi *was* outpacing them, running with no pattern or discernible destination. But the murderer would not get away. Destiny hadn't handed him to her today so that he might live.

Subsuming her consciousness to the Ur-dream, the truth of reality became imminent to Mei. Every moment, every wrinkle of time, was a distortion of the Eternal Present. Possibilities were an *illusion*, a falsehood perpetuated by belief in an unknowable future.

A belief the Ur-dreamers did not concede.

In Mei's vision, the urban landscape went black. Or, more precisely, shades of grey, demarcating the outlines of buildings, people and streets.

Amidst this monochromatic mural, Kenobi's flight scintillated like a bioluminescent claw fish in a sea of night.

Maybe they couldn't keep up with Kenobi. But they didn't have to.

In her state of Chaotomancy, the avenues of probable escape for Kenobi now flared myriad against the benighted backdrop, tendriling out from the speeding fugitive like the tentacles of a thousand-armed dianoga. Then, as Mei concentrated, the plausibilities narrowed and narrowed, the Jedi's escape routes disappearing, dying even to chance, one at a time. One by one, until, there was...

Only....

{{*Cut through Budhila Plaza! NOW.*}}

 Mei relayed through the Force.

Fomadu peeled off even before the command was completed.

Mei clung to Kenobi's tail, no longer in control of her actions, as the Jedi and infant twisted through passageways and streets. She was one with the commands of the Ur-dream, spiraling, weaving after him.

And the Jedi was slowing, tiring.

In a literal flash, Mei saw Fomadu reappear directly in front of Kenobi's distant form. His emerald blade slashing, almost hacking the murdering Jedi's head off. Kenobi barely avoided the chop by the fried hair of his chin, but surrendered priceless momentum as he redirected his bearing. Fomadu drew even, craning back his blade to finish him....

But then, Kenobi vanished, spearing down a sewer duct with the child.

Caught off guard, Mei stopped, momentarily catching her breath, watching Fomadu staring into the chasm depths.

And suddenly, she knew.

There was instinct enough in her Bpfasshi for one last, longing look in her direction.

{{*Fomadu!*}} Mei yelled.

{{*For my brother.*}}

But the Ur-dream, alas, had already chosen her beloved's fate.

Chapter Nine

With a terrible breath-stealing weightlessness, Obi-Wan and Luke hurtled out of the waste shaft.

And fell and fell into darkness.

Wind snapped feverishly at the exhausted Jedi's robes, chilling his damp skin as he plummeted wildly. Immediately splaying himself flat, Obi-Wan maximized his drag ... when abruptly, he could make out his own plunging shadow against the surrounding background of derelict subterranean skyscrapers.

Meaning, a light source *rapidly* approaching from behind.

From the corner of his eye, a flaming specter lit up the murk, as ghost-faced Fomadu dropped through the abysm after them like a guided missile, emerald lightsaber burning.

But Obi-Wan was ready.

Whirling Luke out of mortal danger, he simultaneously ignited his own blue blade, leveraging the clockwise spin of his twisting torso to torque his lightsaber into a flawless, sundering strike of certain demise.

His form was perfect.

But the Bpfasshi's was too.

Fomadu's fleet blade intercepted Obi-Wan's kill stroke with dynamic precision, bashing the lightsaber aside and out of the Jedi Master's crippled hand, propelling it into obscurity. Not faltering, Obi-Wan straightaway grabbed double handed at the Dark Jedi's death-wielding wrist with the urgency of throttling a venomous Tromonid.

Wrestling for the laser sword, they tumbled.

End over end, like dueling mynocks, through the pernicious black.

As they grappled madly, Obi-Wan focused the Force to cleave Luke desperately to his freefalling body. In his exhaustion, however, his raw strength buckled beneath the additional strain. Fomadu folded his blade toward Obi-Wan, eliciting a howl as charring plasma broiled deep into the Jedi's thigh.

The darksider wrenched the smoldering saber to Obi-Wan's neck, its glow revealing his pain and Fomadu's hatred-filled face.

"We *return* to primal darkness as one, Jedi!" The Bpfasshi roared. "To join our brothers and sisters in Chaos!"

The darksider's cockiness bled into his visage, deforming it in grotesque ecstasy.

And *that* was Fomadu's mistake.

For though the Jedi Master was weak beyond measure—his Padawan was not.

Tapping into the tiny luminous being, Obi-Wan allowed Luke's singular Force signature to course into him. And at the same time, he reached for an image, a *longing*, protected at the edge of the Bpfasshi's mind. Then, for one brief breath in time, Obi-Wan's bearded features blurred and morphed, changing ... into features very much like Fomadu's own. The hatred fled from the Bpfasshi's face.

"Z-Zukao?" he rasped.

Then, Obi-Wan bent back the darksider's wrist ... and it was over.

The Force decelerated Obi-Wan and Luke's decent just enough to hit the ground crouching. The Jedi's weary body nevertheless buckled under the tremendous force, shooting agony up his wounded leg like writhing lightning.

A second later, Fomadu's body smashed the ferrocrete beside them like a sack of garbage—his detached head crunching open nearby.

Disrepair and rank filth surrounded them. The feeble lighting, illegally siphoned by social untouchables, kindled a metropolis wasteland of ramshackle buildings and heaping piles of organic entropy. Gank Killers, flesh-gorging vrblthers and other hellish ghouls were surely lurking about.

Obi-Wan's lightsaber was nowhere visible in the bombed-out milieu. Snatching up the deactivated lightsaber from Fomadu's warmth-leaking hand instead, he hastily hobbled Luke and himself behind a partition of rusted durasteel and ferrocrete, all that remained of a time-gutted InterGalactic Bank. Slipping the cradleboard off his shoulders, he leaned Luke gently against the hunk of wall.

The boy wasn't moving.

A terror washed over Obi-Wan. Panicking, he practically crushed his ear to Luke's chest, unable to trust the Force over his own flesh-and-blood senses.

Nothing.

Not a sound.

Then ... a tiny *thud* echoed in his eardrum.

The Jedi almost choked on the gasp of his own relief.

Luke's assistance in the struggle with Fomadu had drained the boy totally, drubbing the newborn unconscious. Obi-Wan now felt through the cradleboard's woven fabric to his small ribcage, his miniscule arms and legs, inspecting for broken bones. Yet, aside from a dusting of dirt, his Padawan appeared unharmed.

Obi-Wan collapsed against the rubble wall, breathing heavily. His injured leg extended, he scooped the other in toward him by the shin.

Like that, they waited. Together.

In the darkness.

But they did not have to wait long.

From the midnight vault above descended a fire of vengeance.

THUD.

Like a monstrous magnification of Luke's faint heartbeat, Mei touched down, laser sword pulsing, a concentric shockwave of refuse slamming out from her epicenter.

Obi-Wan deftly muted his respiration, listening as the woman skulked, crunching through the corrosive debris of their immediate vicinity. Unexpectedly, he heard the Dark Jedi curse and an object roll amidst the rubbish, as if she'd tripped on something.

When the sound of vomiting promptly reached his ears ... he knew Mei had found Fomadu's head.

"Slag your brains, Kenobi..." she damned.

Obi-Wan swallowed, tasting the dryness of his mouth—unable to keep the girl's grief at bay.

"I'm sorry, Mei," he spoke into the dark. "He left me no choice."

The Dark Jedi's footfalls abruptly turned in his direction.

"Is that how you also justified murdering my father?" Mei persisted. "An empty apology and dismissal from your conscience?"

Obi-Wan's eyelids drew closed.

He remembered that day on Susevfi, battling Mei's father ... the man half insane and fully consumed with the dark side.

Like Anakin had been.

Twisted by the dark side, young Skywalker has become, Yoda said. *The boy you trained, gone is he....*

Obi-Wan's mind rewound to the chaos on Coruscant, only hours ago.

Padmé, Anakin has turned to the dark side, Obi-Wan told her. *He was deceived by a lie. We all were.*

Anakin is the father, isn't he?

I'm so sorry....

Obi-Wan was a Master of the Jedi arts, true, but even if his fatal duel with Anakin hadn't expended him to his mental and physical limits, his failed supersonic flight from the Dark Jedi and the wound he'd suffered dueling Fomadu had depleted not just his body but his Force reserves. Even Qui-Gon had fallen to a Sith apprentice under less duress.

Mei was perhaps slightly younger than Anakin, inexperienced. But she *was* young. Fresh. *Uninjured*. She had

to have some command of farseeing, too, if she and Fomadu had rightly predicted his sprinted path of escape.

“I will kill you if I have to, Mei,” he said.

“At last, then, the Jedi reveals his true colors.”

In his debility, not even Obi-Wan knew anymore whether his threat was more bluster than real. He only knew Luke’s life depended on the answer.

In fact, there was only one way to know for sure.

Drawing a breath from the depths of his spirit, Obi-Wan relinquished himself to the will of the Force.

In the unifying Force, Obi-Wan sees Owen and Beru Lars ... and again sees his birth family. Their expressions are vacant. He sees himself rounding the barricade separating him from Mei. Her robe falls from her shoulders, exposing a layer of golden armor underneath. The two warriors stalk one another in a circle, standing off as in the bygone Ductavis honor duels:

One slash.

One slain.

They rush each other—at Force-amplified supersonic speeds. In the blink of an eye, they cross, each lightsaber selecting a different penetrating trajectory. Obi-Wan, high. Mei, low....

They are past one another—his gambit paid off. Obi-Wan has survived. Headless, Mei stumbles before toppling onto her chest. With nothing left, he, too, collapses....

Too late, Obi-Wan realizes he, too, did not clear the kill zone clean. Blood pours from the diagonal gash the Dark Jedi whispered across his breast.

Obi-Wan is dying.

As life seeps from his body and his vision blurs, he makes out the hungry vrblthrs creeping toward Luke....

...And returns, from that possible future, to the here and now.

The vision had taken all of a second.

"You can't hide from me, Kenobi," Mei's words intruded upon him. "Your desperation permeates the Ur-dream like a septic stench."

"Let go, Mei," Obi-Wan implored. "This won't end well. For either of us."

She laughed.

"You still don't understand," she said. "Revenge is something an unfeeling Jedi can *never* understand. Because it means *loving* another."

Slowly, he turned to baby Luke beside him. Still unconscious.

Still unconscious ... because of Obi-Wan's very desperation to *save* him.

You have allowed this Dark Lord to twist your mind! He told Anakin. *Until now ... you've become the very thing you swore to destroy.*

Yes....

Such was the seduction of the dark side of the Force.

Obi-Wan saw, now, that there could be no convincing Mei. And there was ample reason for that ... for Obi-Wan now saw that he himself was teetering upon the dark precipice.

Nothing had ever successfully tempted Obi-Wan. Not a woman's heart, not Qui-Gon's death, not Count Dooku's offer to rule the galaxy.

But he could no longer ignore that in killing Anakin, in accepting his pupil had become *Darth Vader*, Obi-Wan had also murdered something sacred.

His faith.

In others....

And, most of all, in himself.

From the moment he left his apprentice to immolate in Mustafar's lavas, from the instant he became convinced of his failure as a friend, a teacher—a *father*—and committed himself to protecting Anakin's son *no matter the cost*, the dark side had begun sprouting like a weed in his deadening heart.

Since then, he had lived in fear. He had called on the dark side to wipe Zegundis' mind, just as he nearly had done to Vima. He had justified his slaughter of the sapient, if rabid, frog-dogs; *hesitated* when choosing to save the fleeing Gamorreans, and then deceived and beheaded Fomadu.

And the fear. The relentless fear for Luke constantly eating its way through him.

And now, he was ready to kill Mei.

Just as he had her father.

Just as he had *Luke's* father.

Might he or Leia too seek out Obi-Wan ... to revenge their blood?

He took the boy in his arms.

He had committed not just to protecting Anakin's son at all cost, but to loving him.

And yet it was Anakin's *love* that had resulted in the death of Padmé, the very person he loved most.

Just as Obi-Wan had loved Anakin.

Obi-Wan had not killed Luke.

But he might yet.

For, he now realized—as Darth Vader must have—he could *never* give up his love for this precious soul.

And yet ... he would do what he must.

Not without hesitation, the Jedi Master reached into his robe. And, with a first and last kiss, secured the comatose boy

to the cradleboard, steadying it against the wall. Then, rising sorely to his feet, lightsaber in hand, he limped out from concealment.

Obi-Wan ignited his weapon, spitting out Fomadu's vibrant emerald blade.

Mei locked auburn irises on him. Even in the faint lighting, Obi-Wan saw her eyes narrow on his pilfered weapon.

"We cannot escape our destinies," he said.

She gave a terse nod. "The first honest thing you've said."

Staggering slightly against the wall, he said: "I sense the good in you, Mei."

She snorted. "You don't give up, do you?"

Anakin's final words echoed, forever, in his memory.

I HATE YOU!

"I wish that were true," he said. Obi-Wan, too, acknowledged the Bpfasshi's glowing, emerald blade in his hand. "I know I've killed those you love. On that score, I honor your right to vengeance."

"How pompously noble of you," Mei said, moving in.

"But, I have one demand," he continued. "No matter what happens here, Mei ... the boy *must* be seen to his final destination."

The words stopped her in her tracks, the predatory smile on the young woman's face twisting into confusion.

Then, she scoffed.

"You must be spiced or brain dead."

"Reckless, maybe," he conceded. "Your companion said you would indoctrinate the boy in your 'truth'—"

Mei was already shaking her head, her stony death gaze never wavering.

“—I’m asking you to let him choose his *own* fate,” he finished.

Her face was sullen. Unreadable.

She ventured curtly:

“You named a boy Neema?”

Obi-Wan grimaced. Deciding.

“Luke,” he reciprocated. “His name is Luke.”

The young woman was still shaking her head, even as her lightsaber dipped imperceptibly. “You hid him?”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer.

Mei held the tomblike silence. Instant for instant.

Heartbeat for heartbeat.

Then, finally:

“Give me the damn destination, then.”

“If you defeat me,” Obi-Wan vowed, “you will find the coordinates.”

“I *will* defeat you.”

“Then accept.”

At long last, Mei’s laser-like gaze faltered—shifting to the decapitated, discarded body of Fomadu.

“I accept,” she said. Then, shaking off her robe, she exposed a layer of intricate, gold panoply underneath. Protecting almost her entire body, the padded Sith armor reached down to her knees, with a high, protective collar sporting a trio of horizontally-protruding, ascending spikes on either side of her neck.

Just like the vision.

Nothing but the most pinpoint strike would penetrate the armor.

So it had come to this.

Obi-Wan shoved off the wall and stood himself upright.

Then, shifting the lightsaber to his uninjured hand, he committed to his destiny.

Mei's lips parted infinitesimally as the lasersword flew out of his palm.

She tracked the hilt's arc, and the metallic *clink* that went up as the discarded cylinder came to rest seemed to echo into eternities.

The Dark Jedi stared at the deactivated weapon, momentarily dumbstruck.

When she found her voice again, she sibilated a single command.

"Pick it up."

"It's not mine."

Obi-Wan's response appeared to affect her physically, as if causing her every muscle to contract.

"I *said*..." she repeated, "*pick it up*."

"No, young one. I have chosen my destiny," he said. "Now, choose yours. Prove how vengeance is the proud instrument of your so-called love."

"DAMN YOU, JEDI. PICK UP THAT LIGHTSABER AND *FIGHT ME!*"

"No, Mei. You're going to have to kill me—and keep your promise."

Bewilderment etched Mei's youthful features. Then, from deep within the Dark Jedi, a growl of inhuman rage began to build ... bursting in gluttoned, unholy ferocity as she charged Obi-Wan at supersonic speed, lightsaber drawn.

Obi-Wan never looked away.

But unfortunately for him, Mei did.

At the last moment, the young woman catapulted herself over Obi-Wan and over the crumbling wall ... to the other side.

“NO!”

Too late, Obi-Wan dragged himself around the obstruction.

Too late.

Mei was already clutching the cradleboard against her chest, holding the edge of her glowing blade to unconscious Luke’s small throat.

“*NOT THE BOY!*” Obi-Wan croaked.

“You’re a *liar*, Kenobi!” Mei said, tears streaming down her face. “There’s good in *neither* of us. *Good* is the *illusion!* The fairy tale we tell younglings in this sham existence! We’re *all* hypocrites.”

“GIVE HIM TO ME!” Obi-Wan shouted.

“***FIGHT ME! YOU LYING—***”

Luke ... opened his eyes.

Brilliant blue radiance exploded from behind the cradleboard, lancing straight up beyond its length—goring the spot just behind Mei’s chin and erupting from the apex of her skull.

Obi-Wan’s eyes went wide.

And as swiftly as it had materialized, the shaft of light receded.

Mei stumble-stepped, catching herself.

“Even ... destiny lies,” she gurgled.

The Dark Jedi canted forward, and Obi-Wan lunged for Luke.

Catching the cradleboard in a death grip, the Jedi Master hugged Luke to him, who was thrashing, crying. *Very* carefully ... he removed the object he had affixed to its back with fibercord.

Anakin’s lightsaber.

Obi-Wan’s last-resort failsafe.

Except, *he* hadn't been the one to trip the telekinetic trigger.

He stared into Luke's piercing blue eyes.

But ... was it possible? Such power ... in a babe?

"How did you—"

"Vima *told* you, young Master," came a hoarse voice, "The Force is *strong* with this one." Obi-Wan turned ... to see the familiar form of the hunched beggar in her moon moth-eaten robe, shuffling her way toward him.

"Mistress Vima! What are you—"

"The undercity is Vima's *home*," the old woman confessed. "Far from prying eyes."

Recovering from his shock, Obi-Wan looked from the gaunt centenarian to Luke.

"Vima," he said. "The boy. I *must* know. Did you—"

The venerable crone lifted an arthritic hand, silencing him—then extended the other in that practiced panhandler's gesture.

Only instead of asking for charity, this time she was giving it.

In her palm was Obi-Wan's lightsaber.

"Young Master should accept Vima's second offering," she said.

Despite himself, Obi-Wan smiled weakly ... taking his Jedi weapon.

"This instrument is a Jedi's life," she said.

"Yes, Mistress. Thank you."

"Shh," she said, caressing the hair on Luke's head. As his sobs dwindled, gently, the venerable Jedi leaned forward, touching her ancient's lips to Luke's forehead. He did not protest.

Obi-Wan's wounds, visible and otherwise, did not escape her notice either.

"Vima was once a healer," she said. "Allow her to mend you. He shook his head.

"I am honored. But I'm afraid bacta will have to do," he said. "We are hunted. Our transport leaves before long."

Vima nodded. Eyelevel with Obi-Wan's chest, her age-frosted pupils fell on Luke again, as well as the craftsmanship of her cradleboard.

Obi-Wan verged on asking if she desired it back when he saw sadness gathering in her eyes, and she looked away.

"Neema," he heard her whisper. Though whether she did so while reading the name from the cradleboard mesh ... or staring down at Mei's unmoving body, he couldn't tell.

"Now go," Vima said. "Take the boy far, far away from this evil world."

Chapter Ten

As the StarSpeeder 1000 to Kwenn Space Station lifted off, the Jedi Master looked out the rain-spattered viewport one final time at Nar Shaddaa, wondering at the fates of Tholme and T'ra Saa.

Had Mei and Fomadu gotten to them? Were more Bpfasshi or Jensaarai waiting to ambush Yoda on Dagobah? The Dark Jedi *had* spoken of their master.

Obi-Wan shook the thoughts away. There was no way to know. He comforted himself knowing that at least Old Vima had promised to pay that little wretch Shnozitski a house call.

What awaited Luke and Obi-Wan was equally unknown. Even the idea of Hondo Ohnaka's corsairs attacking their

Tatooine-bound starcruiser brought on a half-smile for sheer predictability.

As Obi-Wan squeezed a sterilized hemosponge, feeding the boy his Krayt milk, Luke squeezed back a finger of the Jedi's bandaged hand, looking up with a serene and trusting gaze. Obi-Wan returned it. He found himself actually hoping the boy's aunt and uncle would refuse to take him.

But Obi-Wan didn't believe it for a second.

Safely stowed in Anakin's—*Luke's*—lightsaber was the Kyber memory crystal Padmé's astrodroid Artoo-Detoo had given him, stored with the specific coordinates to the Lars' desert homestead.

Perhaps Owen and Beru would let him train Luke. Perhaps not.

But ... *Uncle Ben*.

He liked the sound of that.

As master and apprentice rocketed away from Nar Shaddaa, one thing was certain. Obi-Wan would be glad to never again see such a wretched hive of scum and villainy....

END

